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POPULAR WESTERN

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Featured Complete Novelet

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By L. P. HOLMES

When Curt Powell decided to gentle a salty horse, he was asking for trouble—especially when tough Sig Loftus, the wrangler, made a six-gun challenge! 9

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There's a difference between them, though not everybody can see it!

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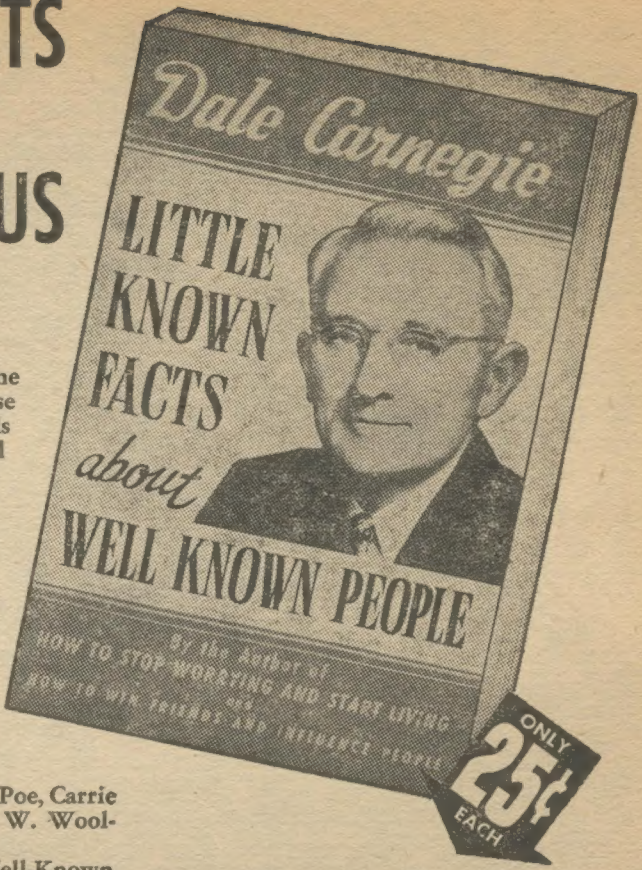
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DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Well, I'm out and around again. But for a while I figured on changing my name to Doc SHORT Trail, with my last ride not far off.

The night nurse pulled up the crib sides of my hospital bed and said goodnight. Barely had I closed my eyes when the light snapped on again. A man who smelled of medicine was looking down at me.

"I'm Doctor So-and-So," he said, real gentle-like. "I'll be at your little party in the surgery, early in the morning. But you won't notice me."

He went out pretty soon, and when I closed my eyes again I made up my mind that if I ever got back from that "little party," I'd be thankful all the rest of my days for the simple

little blessings of life that most of us don't even notice, when well. Everyday blessings, such as the sky, the sun and stars, the song of some bird and the clean, open land Out West where I've always roamed.

Beckoning Sunlight

I woke up in the morning when they jabbed a needle in my hide. That was about the last I remember—until I was back in my hospital bed. They told me I behaved about average, and didn't cuss too copious. For five long days I laid there, my eyes reaching out of the window, to a speck of sunlight that played on a leaf, as though beckoning to me.

So here I am, folks, back in the land of the living. And so far, I've kept that solemn promise I made to myself that night. I'm grateful every blessed minute for the joys of Creation that I used to take for granted.

Just to breathe outdoors air is a precious privilege. To breathe, and to see beyond four walls, and to go hither and yon on my own two legs. I hope never again to complain about little reverses, or to fuss at wind or weather, mud or dust, or minor nuisances such as no-see-um flies.

Here's another funny thing: I've got a powerful hankering to be kind and helpful to others in trouble. Any man who lives just for himself hasn't really lived.

What Kindness Means

In a hospital you learn what kindness means—from the nurses. The life of a trained nurse is made up of unrewarded good deeds. Unrewarded? I wonder. There must come a time when the scales of human justice weigh out the good and evil in us.

Besides being kind, some of those nurses were mighty pretty gals. But as it turned out, the plainest one of the lot is the one that I will remember forever. Just by an encouraging word, a helpful smile, or small thoughtful service she cheered and helped me along at a time when I needed it most.

I'm going back, just to tell her. They say that every ex-patient feels that way. The trouble is, most of them don't do it.

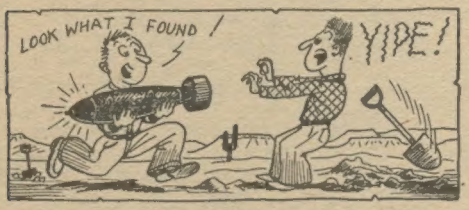
So here we are, folks, at another get-together in the ol' Home Corral. That's another privilege that I appreciate, all over again. Heaps of you Home Corralers are old-time friends, though we never did meet up, face to face.

My first sashay, after I got on the loose, was yonderly to the desert country and its healing sunshine. I came onto some new

things that maybe you'd like to hear something about.

A Freak Bonanza

There's a strange new breed of desert "prospectors". And what do you think they're getting out of the ground? It's lead, not gold. Just plain lead, which has come to be a scarce metal, in big demand. The lead



they're mining, or "harvesting", is on wartime practice bombing areas. It comes in shattered chunks of almost any size, on the surface to ten feet below, from the nose of bombs dropped at white-painted rock targets.

I'm told that one group of prospectors picked up 100,000 pounds, selling it at 10c to 12c a pound—better than $1000 worth. A family in a few days found 15,000 pounds.

This freak bonanza is in southeastern California, in the Imperial Valley region. I recollect when that bleak, barren, sun-baked country was empty wasteland. Now it's known as the richest gardenspot in the world. On the half-million acres of Imperial Valley, 75,000 people live and produce one hundred millions yearly in such crops as early vegetables, cotton, cantalopes, lettuce, rice, grapefruit, dates, livestock and feed. The 1125 square miles of this hell-to-paradise is about the same size as Yellowstone Park. The only other comparison between the two is that Imperial Valley also has geysers.

They're little mud geysers, that shoot up bright-colored ooze that's used in making paint. The gas used to make dry ice comes from a mountain range that hems in Imperial Valley on the north.

East of the fertile, green valley, which is watered by lower Colorado River, is a weird region of giant, marching sand dunes. Before paved highways, a plank road crossed that wilderness, and the planks often were covered by drifting sand. Among those trackless dunes, many "Sahara Desert" movies were made. You're apt to see strange sights—camel caravans, Arabs in flowing

(Continued on page 90)

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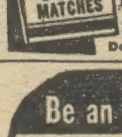

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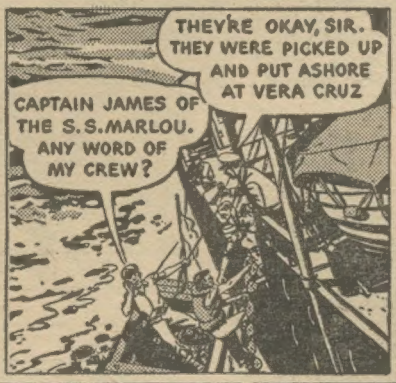

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FITS LIKE IT WAS MADE FOR ME. THIS IS REAL HOSPITALITY, CAPTAIN
FINE. NOW LET'S GO DOWN TO DINNER. THE PEOPLE AT MY TABLE WANT TO MEET YOU

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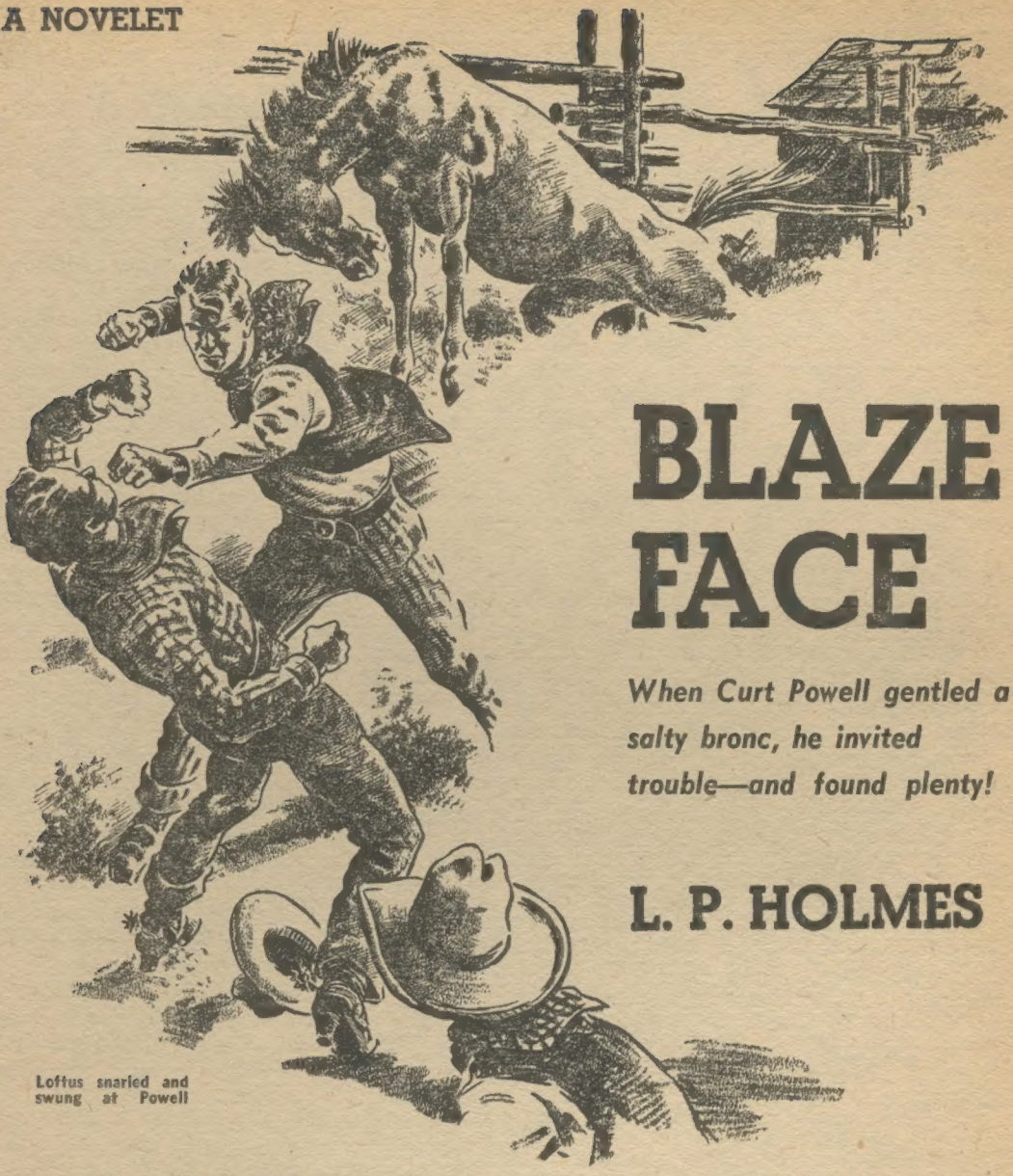


Loftus snarled and swung at Powell

BLAZE FACE

When Curt Powell gentled a salty bronc, he invited trouble—and found plenty!

L. P. HOLMES

CHAPTER I

Horse Breaker

THE HORSE Blaze Face learned to love one man before he grew to hate all others. Bill Chalfant and his crew, after a strenuous month of wild horse hunting, brought him down out of the Blue Mesa country. They brought down fifteen head of wild stuff, all told, but the big three-year-old was easily the prize of the lot. He was a clean boned horse, deep through the withers, short coupled, with powerful, compact haunches.

While red was a broad enough term to describe his color, the fact was that when the sun hit him just right his gleaming hide took on a coppery sheen. The color

was solid, all over, except for a blaze of white running down his face.

It was Andy Gregg who named him. Said Andy, "If I didn't know better I'd say that blaze faced bronc had quarter horse mixed up in his ancestry somewhere."

Mary Chalfant, the Old Man's black eyed, pretty, spirited daughter was entranced with Blaze Face. "I wish," she declared flatly, "that you'd never caught him. He's almost too beautiful to put under a saddle. But as long as he's going to be, I want him."

Grizzled Bill Chalfant, who had never denied his daughter any legitimate wish, grimaced. "How am I goin' to make any profit out of the horse with you skitterin' around from here to yon on him? Besides, he ain't broke yet an' mebbe he never will be. Girl, you can't always tell what's in a wild bronc's heart."

Bill Chalfant spoke a deeper prophecy than he knew.

Sig Loftus laughed at his pessimism. "I'll break him, Mary, and you'll get him. That bronc will learn who's boss around this layout."

Mary smiled up at Sig Loftus. It was generally accepted that she and Loftus were 'that way' about each other. "That's a promise, Sig," said Mary. "But don't you treat him too rough."

"No rougher than I have to," Loftus told her.

In an aside to Curt Powell, Andy Gregg murmured, "That means he'll treat the bronc just as tough as he possibly can and still get away with it. Sig Loftus can ride, no question about it. I'd even go so far as to say he's just about the best man in a rough saddle I ever saw. But there's a mean streak in him. That blaze faced bronc is in for a bad time."

Curt Powell said nothing, though his private opinion agreed with Andy's. Curt was on the quiet side, a lean, cool eyed young rider, well liked by every man in the outfit except Sig Loftus. Between him and Loftus lay a deep-seated, unnamed antagonism. Some of this sprang from the effect of Mary Chalfant's warm smile, for Mary, though Sig Loftus was easily her favorite, also knew a genuine liking for the quiet, soft spoken Curt. Loftus, who was as jealous as he was vain, realized this and resented it. And Curt returned Loftus' dislike in full.

This mutual antagonism had never flared fully into the open. That wasn't Sig Loftus' fault. For more than once he had gone out of his way to try and strike up trouble with Curt. But Curt had kept his mouth shut, shrugged it off. Which led to the contemptuous opinion on the part of Loftus that Curt had a streak in him. Sig Loftus learned different the day he set out to break Blaze Face.

Supremely and overbearingly confident of his ability to ride any animal that ever walked, there was no subtlety in Sig Loftus' method of going about breaking horses to saddle. He merely rode them and rode them till they quit. If he broke their spirit in the mean time, that was all right with him. In fact, he seemed to prefer that sort of ending, for it inflated his sense of mastery, upped his ego. It was this method he had in mind the morning he set out to break Blaze Face.

LOFTUS was startled when Curt Powell said gravely, "You're walkin' into something, Loftus. Your usual methods ain't going to work with this horse. That's no ordinary bang tail out there. That horse will fight you to death—you'll never break him trying to rough it out with him. The horse is intelligent—I never saw a finer looking head on an animal. Why don't you take it easy, gain the bronc's confidence and work up to the riding part of the deal gradually?"

To which Loftus laughed sneeringly. "Who's top twister in this outfit, Powell—you or me? I've unrolled the kinks out of more tough ones than you'll ever see. I smooth 'em down for guys like you to ride. You go play patty-cake with some old bangtail that hasn't got a buck jump in its system. Leave the tough ones to me."

The coolness in Curt Powell's eyes deepened. "You're not out to break an ordinary bronc for ordinary ridin'. You're out to gentle a grand horse for Mary Chalfant's use. Handle the bronc right and she'll have a horse to date time from. Handled your way, even if you get the bronc to stay put under a saddle, which I doubt, you'll still end up with a wild, resentful fire-eater that won't be safe for Mary to get anywhere near. You might think of that."

"I believe Curt's got something there, Sig," suggested Andy Gregg.

The red horse went into a reaching leap with a terrific snap at the end of it

Sig Loftus sneered again. "Said one old woman to another old woman—!" He turned, heading for the corrals and yelled to Pete Bostwick and Shorty Dye. "You two give me a hand in getting my hull on that red bronc. Powell and Gregg here can't quite get up nerve enough to tackle such a chore."

Andy Gregg, usually the most amiable of men, growled, "The over-bearing fathead! I hope that bronc tosses him plumb over the feed sheds. Should he break Loftus' neck, I don't believe I'd weep one drop."

"All I hope," murmured Curt, "is that the horse comes out of it sound and still with all its spirit."

IT TOOK Sig Loftus and Pete Bostwick and Shorty Dye a good half hour to get Loftus' saddle cinched into place. They had to rope Blaze Face first, throw him and blindfold him. It was a wicked, no quarter struggle, the horse fighting these men and their ropes with a silent, endless ferocity. It was Sig Loftus who handled one rope with the calculated purpose of choking Blaze Face down until his breath came only in a thin, strangled whistling.

Curt Powell shifted restlessly back and forth along the top rail of the corral, palms sweating, lips drawn thin and tight, every inch of him crying out in silent protest against this method of handling the red horse. For it was as he had told Loftus. This was no ordinary horse. Couldn't Loftus see that? Couldn't he read the wild, deathless spirit in those blazing eyes, those quivering, distended, straining nostrils?

Sig Loftus' temper, always black and easily stirred, was up and raging now. He was out to master this horse—or kill it. When Shorty Dye protested the way Loftus was choking the animal, Loftus cursed him harshly. Shorty was limping from where a flailing hoof had glanced off his leg, but he held no resentment against Blaze Face. For Shorty was a sportsman.

At last it was done. Blaze Face was on his feet, humped and quivering and foaming. The saddle was in place, the cinch set, the blind fold across the horse's face. Sig Loftus went into the saddle, his dark face harsh and forbidding. As he jerked off the blindfold he set his spurs savagely.

No men among the watchers had ever seen a horse go so high in one terrific, twisting leap. That leap ended in a snap that like to tore Sig Loftus' head off. When horse and rider came down, Loftus had lost a stirrup. Blaze Face whirled, cat fast and went up into another explosive leap that literally blew Sig Loftus out of the saddle.

Loftus landed hard, very hard, face down. His head bounced from the impact and for a moment he lay there, half stunned. Blaze Face bucked on down the corral, trying to rid himself of the saddle. Sig Loftus rolled over, got up, groggy. That smash in the face the hard earth had given him had done him no good. His mouth was cut and he was bleeding from the nose. His black eyes were murderous.

From his perch on the corral rail beside Curt Powell, Andy Gregg chanted, "Said one old woman to another old woman—!"

Sig Loftus cursed Andy bitterly, before turning and starting for Blaze Face again. Shorty Dye caught at Loftus' arm. "Don't try it, Sig," cried Shorty. "That bronc is dynamite. You can't ride him—no man can ride him. Not while he's like this."

Loftus drove a fist into Shorty's face, knocking him away. Then he went for Blaze Face at a lurching run. It was incredible that Loftus should have done what he did. Blaze Face had quit trying to buck the saddle off, was swinging back and forth along the far side of the corral. Now, seeing Loftus coming at him, it was the instinct of the wild that caused Blaze Face to try and evade. He raced along beside the fence.

But Loftus was coming in at an angle, pinching him off and at the last second Loftus leaped, grabbing at the saddlehorn. He caught it, hung on, with Blaze Face dragging him. Loftus pulled himself up and ahead, managed to strike his feet and leap, and the forward pull brought him into the saddle again.

It was a superb exhibition of horsemanship, but it was blind, wild, reckless rage, also—and the worst of judgment. For Blaze Face met the challenge with another of those towering, explosive leaps before Loftus could even find his stirrups. This time he threw Loftus completely over the corral fence.

Loftus came up staggering, running for the bunkhouse. "He's gone loco!" ex-

claimed Andy Gregg. "He's goin' for a gun—the crazy, black tempered fool—!"

Curt Powell dropped into the corral, raced across it, vaulted the far fence, sped after Loftus. Bill Chalfant, who had been at work in his ranch office, attracted now by the commotion, came hurrying down across the quadrangle. Mary, who had chosen this bright morning to wash her luxurious black hair, came running after him, one towel across her shoulders, another about her head.

SIG LOFTUS gained the bunkhouse and was coming out of it again before Curt Powell could reach it. Andy Gregg had been right. Loftus had a six shooter in his hand.

The man was plainly beside himself. Trampled ego, fury over being thwarted in conquest and just plain ingrown meanness, had sent Sig Loftus berserk, with only one thought in his temper blackened mind, which was to destroy the thing that had successfully resisted him, this horse that had tossed him as easily as an ordinary bucker might have piled the rawest beginner. The man's ego had been tremendous; but he couldn't stand to see it deflated.

Curt Powell stepped in front of him. "Drop that gun, Loftus! You'll not use it on Blaze Face. The horse whipped you, fair and square. Be man enough to admit it. You've nothing to be ashamed of—the horse is tremendous. Drop that gun!"

Sig Loftus didn't drop it. He glared at Curt Powell, cut and bleeding lips peeled back. Curt saw the resolve form in Loftus' red glinting eyes. Curt dropped low, dove at Loftus' knees. The gun roared, the lead whipping by just inches above Curt's driving shoulders.

Curt's dive cut Loftus' legs from under him, brought him down in a heap. Then they fought for the gun. Curt got his left hand on Loftus' gun wrist, pushed it wide and back. He smashed his right fist to Loftus' jaw, twice. The blows weakened Loftus, dazed him. Curt grabbed the gun, tore it away from him, then rolled clear and got to his feet. That was when Bill Chalfant and Andy Gregg arrived.

Loftus lurched up, tried to get at Curt. Bill Chalfant and Andy Gregg pushed him back. Chalfant's big voice rose, angrily roaring. "Sig! What the devil's the matter with you? Are you crazy? Calm down—back up and calm down!"

"He's worse than crazy," panted Andy Gregg. "The red bronc tosses him without half tryin', takin' some of the fat-head out of him. He can't take it so he goes after a gun to use on the bronc. Curt heads him off and Loftus is just crazy mean enough to take a shot at Curt. We ought to back away and let Curt use that gun on him, the low down whelp."

"Andy, you shut up!" yelled Chalfant.

The ranch owner pushed Sig Loftus back still further. "Go into the bunkhouse and stay there until you cool off," he ordered harshly. "The idea of nearly pullin' a shootin' scrape over a cussed wild horse. Do as I tell you!"

For a moment Loftus tried to face the irate cattleman, then he whirled and lurched back into the bunkhouse. Curt Powell handed the gun to Bill Chalfant without comment. Chalfant said, "If I'd thought for a minute anything like this would happen, I'd never have brought that red bronc down off Blue Mesa."

"The bronc is all right," said Curt quietly. "But it's one that'll never be gentled by going at it rough."

Mary Chalfant, standing by her father, was pale, her dark eyes very sober and wide. Mary had never seen Sig Loftus as he had been when he faced her father, before heeding the cattleman's order and going into the bunkhouse. What she had seen had shocked her. Now she looked at Curt Powell as though it was his fault that this had happened. Curt's lips tautened and he went back to the corral.

Andy Gregg, oldest member of Chalfant's crew, had started riding for Chalfant when the ranch was just a two man affair. Now he spoke with the blunt freedom warranted by long tenure. "Hadn't been for Curt takin' that gun off Loftus, there's no tellin' where this thing mighta ended up. Loftus needs his ears pinned back."

Chalfant turned on him half angrily. "Will you keep still! You're worse than an old woman. Just because you don't like Sig is no reason I don't, or Mary don't."

Andy shrugged, turning away. "You got a powerful stomach for likin', Bill—if you still do after today."

Saying which, Andy went over and joined Curt and Shorty Dye and Pete

Bostwick as they set about cornering Blaze Face and getting Sig Loftus' saddle off him.

CHAPTER II

Horse Maker

AN UNEASY quiet lay over Bill Chalfant's Long C ranch headquarters. For two days Sig Loftus kept to the bunkhouse, glowering and silent. He spoke to no one and hated Curt Powell openly through hot and fuming eyes. Curt kept away from him as much as possible, going into the bunkhouse only to sleep at night. With the help of Andy Gregg and Shorty Dye, Curt had shunted Blaze Face into a side corral where the horse was all alone and Curt spent every spare moment he could find out at that corral.

In the evenings he would sit for hours out on the corral fence, talking to the horse and whistling a clear, trilling birdlike note. At first Blaze Face would swing over to the farthest spot away from Curt he could find, and stand there with alert, uptossed head. But gradually, as Curt would sidle slowly along the fence, closer and closer to him, Blaze Face quit swinging nervously away until, one evening, he stayed put while Curt moved to within twenty feet of him.

"That's better, Big Feller," droned Curt caressingly. "You know I'm your friend. You know I'd never mistreat you. We're goin' to be pals, you and me."

There was a watering trough in one angle of the corral where Blaze Face could drink and each evening before he left for the bunkhouse, Curt would fork a good supply of wild hay into the corral and slide a feed box with a measure of oats under the corral fence.

Though, during the quiet of the night, Blaze Face would feed on the hay, nearly a week went by before he mastered his suspicion of the feed box. But when he did he licked the box clean, for never before in all his wild life had he tasted anything as good and satisfying as that grain.

Curt smiled when, the next morning, he saw the grain box empty. That evening Curt brought out the grain box early, slid it under the fench and perched within ten feet of it, whistling that birdlike call, talking quietly.

Blaze Face was interested, wanting that grain. He worked back and forth around the corral, coming once to within a dozen feet of Curt and the feed box, though not quite able to bring himself in the rest of the way and go to eating. Memory of that wild day when he had fought ropes and a saddle and a man astride him were still too fresh and hostile.

It was two nights later that Blaze Face overcame his distrust of this man on the fence and fed at the grain box with Curt so close to him he could have reached over and hit the animal with his hat. Curt let it go at that for a couple of days, then took his seat right above the box. And Blaze Face, after fussing and fidgiting for a full half hour finally sidled up to the box and began licking up the grain. And Curt, whistling and talking, knew then that the big fight was won. A week later Blaze Face ate grain out of the box while Curt Powell held it in his hands.

Within another week, whenever Curt came up to the corral, whistling that trilling note, Blaze Face would race over to meet him, to be rewarded either with a feed of grain or with a piece of hard candy which Curt had bought at Bob Markham's store in Mesa City. Observing this one evening, Andy Gregg said gravely, "You're layin' up a store of misery for yoreself and that bronc, Curt. You're gettin' to think too much of the bronc and the bronc of you. Ain't nobody else on the ranch can get within forty feet of the hoss, while it will foller you around like a puppy dog."

"What's wrong with that, Andy?" asked Curt.

"Well," said Andy, "mebbe you've forgot that it ain't yore bronc—that it belongs to Bill Chalfant and that Bill ain't ketchin' wild broncs an' havin' 'em broke for ridin', just for the fun of it. Bill Chalfant is a good man, but he's hard headed an' a business man. While you were in town yesterday, Boke Lester was over to see the Old Man. He's offered to buy the entire jag of broncs we brought down off Blue Mesa, jest as soon as they're fit to

put a saddle on. The Old Man agreed to the deal and he's give Sig Loftus orders to go ahead and break the broncs, startin' tomorrow."

Curt looked at Blaze Face, his lips tightening. "Loftus could never break that horse by the methods he uses."

"He'll break it or kill it," said Andy. "I heard him tell Pete Bostwick he starts in on Blaze Face first thing in the morning."

ANDY went away and Curt fed the horse its evening ration of grain. while Blaze Face ate, Curt used curry comb and brush, a treatment Blaze Face was already used to and enjoyed and which made his hide shine like coppery silk. Knowing what would be in store again for the horse under the handling of Sig Loftus, revolt rose in Curt Powell. He looked up at the ranchhouse, saw a light burning in the room Bill Chalfant used as an office, and in sudden decision went over there.

Bill Chalfant, at work over his desk, leaned back and asked, "What's on your mind, Curt?"

Curt did not answer for a moment. In another part of the ranchhouse Mary Chalfant was playing the piano and singing. Chiming in now and then was the voice of Sig Loftus. Loftus was definitely back in Mary's good graces. The man was good looking and could turn on the charm when he wanted to.

Curt looked at Chalfant with level eyes. "You aim to let Loftus make another try at Blaze Face?"

Chalfant leaned back and stoked his pipe. "Reckon I am, Curt," he said slowly. "I'm not in business for my health. Boke Lester is willing to take all those wild broncs off my hands, soon as they're ready to stand a saddle."

"Loftus can't break Blaze Face the way he goes about things. That horse is different. Handle him rough and he'll fight you to the death. Work with him right and he's like a big affectionate dog. I got him now so he nuzzles my pockets for hard candy."

"Sure," nodded Chalfant drily. "I know you have. But what good does that make the horse to me or anybody else? You're making a one man bronc out of him. To be of value to me, the horse must be tamed so anybody can slap a saddle on him and use him. Sorry, but after all a bronc is just a bronc, and I got to move 'em to make a living."

"Loftus aims to start on Blaze Face tomorrow again," said Curt. "You know what that'll mean. He'll handle Blaze Face wicked."

Bill Chalfant frowned. "Sig's broke a lot of broncs for me. He's one of the best hands in the business. Blaze Face has got to learn, just like all other broncs. I can't afford to keep the horse around as a star boarder. Come down to earth, boy. You're getting the wrong slant on this horse. There's lots of wild broncs."

Curt built a cigarette. "I been havin' you hold out part of my wages for quite a while, Bill. Aimin' to get together a stake and maybe set up a little headquarters of my own someday. How much I got comin'?"

Chalfant reached for the time book and riffled through a number of pages doing some mental arithmetic. "Looks like between five and six hundred dollars. That's a pretty good stake, Curt, for a feller your age. Stay with it and you'll be independent some day."

"How much," asked Curt quietly, "will you take for Blaze Face?"

Chalfant slammed the time book shut with some irritation. "Knew you were leading up to that," he growled. "Don't be a soft headed fool, Curt. You'd be a fool to buy that bronc, even if I'd sell it to you. You can't afford to pay what that horse is worth."

"I'll pay," said Curt briefly. "How much?"

Bill Chalfant shrugged. "Talk to Boke Lester. He's already paid me some down on that jag of broncs, the rest to come on delivery of the broncs, ready to saddle. Bill of sale all drawn up and signed. Doubt if Boke will sell you that particular bronc. He was some taken with it. Your money is your own to do as you please with, of course. But I still say you're a fool. How'll you take it, check or cash?"

"Cash for half, if you got it. Check for the rest.

"This mean that you're quittin' me?" asked Chalfant.

Curt gave the ranchman another of those level, direct looks. "Not unless you want it that way."

"I won't unless that bronc brings on

more trouble between you and Sig Loftus," said Chalfant bluntly. "But I won't stand for any more ruckus between you two. That's flat and final."

"If," said Curt quietly, "there's a ruckus, it'll be because Loftus starts it."

As Curt went out he could still hear Mary Chalfant playing and singing, with Sig Loftus joining in. Curt's eyes went bleak. That money he'd been saving and the plans built around it, had held a hopeful place for Mary Chalfant in the picture. He realized now that it had been an empty hope all along.

IT WAS fifteen full miles from Bill Chalfant's Long C headquarters to Boke Lester's Four over L ranch. It was close on to midnight when Curt Powell arrived. The Four over L was dark and quiet. Curt finally managed to rouse the cook.

"Boke ain't here," informed that sleepy individual. "Him and the boys rode over to Sam Dura's. Weddin' or somethin'."

It was eleven miles more to Sam Dura's place. Midnight had long gone by the time Curt reached there. It had been a wedding, Sam's girl Lucy had married Buck Addison. The celebration was just about over when Curt arrived.

Boke Lester was cagy, a shrewd, hard trader. "Well, now," he fenced. "I dunno as I want to sell that bronc, Curt. Struck me it might have the makin's of a real hoss."

"I ain't here to bargain," said Curt. "I want the horse. How much?"

Boke Lester scrubbed his chin with thumb and forefinger eyeing Curt speculatively. "If you want the bronc two hundred and fifty dollars worth, it's yores," said Lester finally.

This was way out of line. Lester knew it and Curt knew it and a cold flicker shone in Curt's eyes for a moment. But he reached for a pocket. "Write out the bill of sale," he said.

Lester did this, counted and pocketed the money Curt handed him. "Never made a faster or better profit on a bronc in my life," he exulted. "Where'd you get the money, Powell—rob a bank?"

Curt put the bill of sale carefully away. "I never rob anybody," he said contemptuously. "Particularly my friends."

Boke Lester gulped, grew red around the ears and glared at Curt as he turned away and went over to Sam Dura. "How's for borrowing a fresh bronc, Sam?" asked Curt. "I got to get back to the Long C by daylight."

Sam, a good sort, said "Sure, Curt. Help yourself. Better take an extra one for a relay. You ain't got too much time."

Never were words more true. Though Curt fairly rode the two fresh horses into the ground, changing saddle from one to the other, the sun was already up when he raced up to the Long C headquarters.

The first sound to meet his ears was the wild, fighting squeal of a horse. It was Blaze Face. Sig Loftus and Pete Bostwick both had ropes on the red horse, were trying to choke him down. Curt left his saddle and went over the corral fence like a wild man. He grabbed Pete Bostwick and spun him away.

"Get out of here, Pete," he said harshly. "That's my horse you got a rope on."

Pete, bewildered, backed away, but Loftus was still swinging and yanking on his rope. Curt grabbed the rope, jerked it away, let up on the tension of it. "Lay off, Loftus!" gritted Curt. "Blaze Face is my bronc now. Don't you ever touch him again!"

Sig Loftus' black temper was at work in him again. He was covered with corral dust and was limping. Since the first day he had tangled with Blaze Face, Loftus had hated the horse. Now, on his second attempt he had started out to assert his mastery in no uncertain fashion. In working to corner the horse and get a rope on him, Loftus had foolishly tried to head the horse off when it came racing at him. A trifle slow in dodging clear at the last moment, he had barely escaped being run down. As it was Blaze Face had merely flicked him with a shoulder, but the impact had knocked Loftus end over end. He had come up raging.

Now, at Curt's interference, he whirled. Maybe Loftus had not fully heard or understood what Curt had said. At any rate, here before him was the man he hated, again keeping him away from the horse he hated. Loftus snarled, hunched a shoulder and swung.

The punch was fast, unexpected. It knocked Curt Powell down. Curt came up slowly, a little dazed. Hardly was he off his knees when Loftus rushed, both fists clubbing. Curt covered up as best he

could, taking the worst of the blows on his arms and shoulders. Loftus rushed him half way across the corral before Curt got a chance to hit back. Coming out of his crouch he got in an overhand right that made a mess of Loftus' mouth, shook the bigger man up.

This gained Curt the short respite he needed to clear his head of the worst of the fuzziness that first punch had left. So, when Loftus rushed again, Curt was able to spear him with a left and cross a right that made a further wreck of Loftus' mouth and make his knees wobble.

That was as far as they were able to go before Bill Chalfant separated them. He pushed Loftus back and whirled on Curt. "I told you what would happen if you started another ruckus over that horse. You know the answer, Powell!"

"Yes, I know," panted Curt. "I'm through. Only—I didn't start it. Loftus took the first swing."

"You had no business buttin' in," growled Chalfant. "That cussed bronc—"

"Is mine," cut in Curt. "Here's the proof."

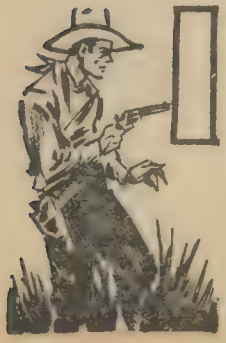
He brought out the bill of sale. Chalfant glanced at it. "All right. The bronc's yores. Take it and get out of here."

Curt faced him, head back. "As soon as I can, Bill. You know I'll have to quiet him and take it easy with him for a few days. But don't worry. I'll pay you for his lodging—and my own."

"Oh, hell!" grumbled Chalfant. "You know that ain't necessary. It's only—well, we had a happy outfit before that bronc came along. Wish now I'd never brought him off Blue Mesa."

CHAPTER III

The Killer Horse



IT WAS late that afternoon before Curt was finally able to get close enough to Blaze Face to take the ropes off him. The horse was trembling and uncertain. But by dark he was standing quietly while Curt curried away the marks of the brief morning struggle.

That night Curt spread a couple of blankets on some wild hay and slept in the corral. He was dog weary, having gone sleepless the night before, but he stayed awake long enough to have Blaze Face feed all about him and finally reach a questing nose to sniff at him as he lay in the blankets. Later, when Curt had gone to sleep, the horse sniffed him again, then with a long sigh of contentment, stood motionless, almost over him.

Once a slim figure stole down from the ranchhouse and stood at the far end of the corral, watching. In the bright light of the stars, Mary Chalfant could make out the sleeping figure of Curt Powell and the big red horse standing over that still figure. Once the horse lifted its head and looked Mary's way. But it made no other move than this.

The next morning Curt said to the horse, "You're a smart scoundrel, got more savvy than any bronc I ever handled before. But I can't walk away from this ranch, leadin' you. I got to ride you away, or I'll be the laughin' stock of the country. So it is up to you, Big Feller—and just how fast you can learn and how much you trust me."

Blaze Face hated a rope of any sort, but before noon that day Curt had a hackamore on him. By midafternoon Curt had a saddle blanket spread on his powerful back and was leading him around the corral. That evening when Curt brought the feed box of oats, he brought his saddle, too.

Andy Gregg and Shorty Dye came to watch. "If that bronc stands quiet under yore saddle, Curt," said Andy, "then he's either the smartest bronc that ever lived or you're a magician."

Curt smiled quietly.

"I'm no magician, but the Big Feller is no fool."

Twice Curt tried with the saddle and twice Blaze Face swung away. But on the third try, his muzzle deep in the oat box, he stood quietly while Curt lowered the saddle into place. All the time Curt kept talking to him, petting him. Deftly Curt reached under, caught the cinch, pulled it gently into place and held it there. Blaze Face kept on eating. Curt threaded the latigo and drew the cinch just snug.

Curt turned to Andy and Shorty. "That'll do for now. We'll spend the evenin' gettin' used to that."

Shorty let out a long breath. "And that's the same bronc that'd fight Sig Loftus every step of the way. Curt, I can't figger it."

Curt shrugged. "No mystery. Only a fool man can make a fool horse. Some broncs are smarter than others, of course. Blaze Face is plenty smart. He knows I'm not going to choke him down, rough him. He's coming to trust me. When we brought him in here he was scared and lonesome. He wanted a friend. I've been one to him."

"I've knowed of wild broncs that never did tame down, no matter what," said Shorty.

"I've known of humans who never did either, until they were hung," drawled Curt. "You can't work to no set rule with either broncs or humans, Shorty."

Andy Gregg nodded. "And Sig Loftus tries to. He goes at every bronc the same way. Choke 'em down, rough 'em, break 'em by sheer brute strength and meanness."

"I still can't hardly believe my eyes," sighed Shorty.

Curt again spread his blankets in the corral and when he crawled into them, Blaze Face hung around as before. Later, with the rest of the ranch dark and silent, Curt threw his blankets aside, pulled on his boots. He had left his saddle on Blaze Face, so now, as he edged the cinch a little tighter, he murmured, "This is it, Big Feller. Just you and me. I'm gamblin' that by this time you trust me and like me, that you won't want to get rid of me like you did Sig Loftus."

FOR nearly half an hour Curt led Blaze Face around and around the corral. He even looped the hackamore lead to the saddle horn and still Blaze Face followed him, pacing easily at his shoulder. So then Curt began the big test. He pulled at the near stirrup, putting some of his weight on it. All the time he talked, soothingly.

He pulled a couple of pieces of hard candy from his pocket, fed them to the horse and, while Blaze Face crunched and lipped at these relished morsels, Curt turned the stirrup, stepped into it and pulled himself slowly up and into the saddle.

Blaze Face swung his head. Curt leaned forward, patting the arched neck. "Well," he said, "there you are and here I am. Nothing to get excited about is there, Big Feller. Long as I sit a saddle on you we're together, ain't we? I like that and you do, too. Now let's try walkin' around some."

It was after midnight when Curt finally swung down from his saddle, stripped it and the saddle blanket aside and brushed Blaze Face down. "In the mornin'," he told the big horse exultantly, "you and me set out to see some of the world. In a way it's goin' to be tough leavin' this layout, in another way it's best. Things I want to forget, and distance will help that."

In the cookshack the next morning Curt turned to Bill Chalfant and said quietly, "This is the last meal I'll be doin' you for, Bill. Thanks for everything."

Chalfant stirred restlessly. Under his hard headed business exterior he was a kindly man. He had always liked Curt. "No need of rushing things, boy. Walkin' ain't no business for a cowhand. It'll be some time before you'll have that Blaze Face bronc worked down so you can ride him away. You're welcome to stay until then. Mebbe there's no need of you leavin' at all."

Curt glanced along the table where Sig Loftus was glowering at his plate. "I figure it's best all around that I leave, Bill. And I won't be walkin'. I'll be ridin'—on Blaze Face."

Loftus' head jerked up. "I want to see that! Any bronc I can't ride, you can't, Powell."

Shorty Dye reached for his pocket. "I got twenty dollars says that he can, Loftus."

"Sucker money," sneered Loftus. "Put it up!"

Said Andy Gregg. "Here's twenty more if you want to cover it, Loftus."

Loftus laughed gloatingly. "I can use an extra forty."

As they left the cookshack, Bill Chalfant said, "If you're dead set on leavin', Curt—I think Mary'd appreciate yore sayin' good-by."

Curt turned toward the ranchhouse without a word. Mary was in the kitchen, spick and span and very pretty in fresh gingham. She looked at him gravely. "So it's good-by, Curt?"

"I reckon, Mary. I'm wishin' you a lot of luck, Mary—you and Sig. Good trailin'."

Mary said, with surprising tartness, "More people can be the biggest fools! How long do you expect to be gone?"

Curt shrugged. "It's a big world. Me and Blaze Face aim to look over quite a chunk of it."

"Why should you leave at all?"

Curt's grin was a trifle crooked. "Seems like Sig Loftus and me just can't get along. And yore Pa don't like that."

Mary stared out of a window, suddenly grave. She said, her voice queerly soft, "Good riding, Curt. Only, you might remember . . . the trail back."

When Curt went down to the corral, Mary slipped out the back door, circled down by the big barn and watched from there. Bill Chalfant and the rest of the crew were out at Blaze Face's corral. Sig Loftus was on the top rail, staring with hard eyes at Blaze Face, who was moving uneasily up and down the far side of the corral. "This," sneered Loftus, "I want to see."

Curt climbed the fence, walked over to Blaze Face. The horse came several steps to meet him, nickering softly. Curt petted him. "It's all right, Big Feller. That mean jigger on the fence will never touch you again," murmured Curt. "Nobody will, except me."

The horse stood like a rock while Curt slipped the hackamore on and saddled him. He shifted about uneasily while Curt shook hands all around, except with Loftus. Curt opened the gate and whistled and Blaze Face trotted up to him. Curt stepped into the saddle. "*Adios*, gang," he said. "Always remember, any bronc is smarter than you think."

They moved away, the lean young cowboy and the big red horse. Bill Chalfant stared after them, slack jawed. "If I hadn't seen it I'd never have believed it on a stack of bibles," he mumbled.

Shorty Dye walked over to Sig Loftus, hand outstretched. "Pay me," said Shorty, then added with more profound wisdom than he knew, "there's broncs—an' broncs. There's men—an' men."

As for Blaze Face, he had learned to trust and love one man.

THEY traveled far trails, did Curt Powell and Blaze Face. Curt was riding away from something he wanted to forget, but he found that distance didn't help and forgetting was hard. Particularly at night, over lonely campfires, did the memories come back to plague him. In the firelight was always the face of Mary Chalfant.

Blaze Face was content. Any place this man was, Blaze Face was satisfied to be. His old days of wild freedom on Blue Mesa were dim and forgotten. While Curt made camp in the evenings, Blaze Face would graze, free of rope or saddle. That bird-like trilling whistle of Curt's would bring him racing, at any time. At night while Curt slept, Blaze Face would stand over him. It seemed they came to understand each other's moods, even one another's thoughts. Never were man and horse so close.

In their drifting they hit some towns. Blaze Face came to tolerate other men—hostlers in livery barns, feeding and currying him. But no man other than Curt ever sat astride him. His color, his size, his beauty and blinding speed made other men covet him. Dozens of offers to buy him were made, to be met with blunt refusal. Still men coveted, one in particular,

[*Turn page*]

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a pock-marked, slant eyed man who had a partner.

So, one night, while Curt sat beside his campfire, cooking a frugal meal, out in a lonely, desolate stretch of country, there came the sound of a shot. Curt lurched, toppled over.

Blaze Face, grazing out in the surrounding dark, tossed an alert, startled head. There was no other sound, so presently Blaze Face resumed his grazing. But an uneasiness grew in him and presently, snorting softly, he trotted up to the fire. Out of the dark a rope whistled, an accurate noose settling around his neck. As he reared against this a second loop sailed in from the other side.

The ropes were strong and there were two of them. At the ends of them Blaze Face was half led, half dragged away into the night. And it was here that the great hate for all men that had been seeded by Sig Loftus, grew deeper.

It was evening of the next day when a little group of drifting Shoshone Indians came into the spring where Curt Powell had camped. At first they thought they had found a dead man. But as they turned him over, Curt groaned faintly. So an ancient squaw took over, drawing on her own and all the tribal wisdom in such things. Fires were built, special herbs gathered and brewed. For a full three weeks the Indians never moved from that camp. When they did they carried with them a thin, wasted white man, but a live one.

A full hundred miles to the north a pock-marked, slant-eyed killer stood ready to mount and ride a big red horse. The place had an isolated, ramshackle cabin and a small corral. The horse was gaunt, caked with sweat and dirt, scarred and battered and marked with welts from quirt and rope end and choking noose. It had been a terrific struggle for the half-breed and his partner to get the horse this far, to blindfold him and saddle him.

"You're a fool to try and ride him, Lank," said the partner.

"That other hombre rode him, so I can," growled Lank. "He was a one man bronc before. Now he'll have to get used to another boss."

At mention of the other hombre, the partner shivered. Murder was murder. But Lank was like that. When he wanted a certain horse badly enough, he'd kill to get it.

Lank swung into the saddle, stripped off the blindfold. The next moment dynamite was exploding under him. The first jump shook him loose, the second threw him, smashing into the corral fence. Lank never moved after that. His head was bent far over at a gruesome angle.

The partner was stupified, hardly knowing what to do. In the end he dragged the dead horse thief out of the corral and then rode to see a certain man.

"There's a bronc over in the corral of the Red Slide cabin," he told this man. "Yours for the taking. You're lookin' for rodeo bucking stock. That there's one nobody will top. He threw Lank Steuben so far an' hard he broke Lank's neck. That bronc's a devil. I never want to see him again."

So more men came with more ropes. They buried Lank Steuben and they took Blaze Face away. A killer, they called him, a killer horse. He fought them from the first, he fought them to the last. But there was always so many men, with so many ropes. He was prodded and dragged and harried into his first rodeo saddling chute under the name of Prairie Fire.

CHAPTER IV

Bucking Stock

OVER THE swing of a rodeo circuit that took in five states word traveled that Jack Dyer, who made a business of furnishing bucking stock for the shows, had a new horse in his string that was a terror. A big red devil horse that nobody could ride. At first this report was accepted with frank skepticism. It was a story that had gone out before in other seasons. The cynics said it was just advertising talk and among the ranks of the hardened, reckless professional bronc twisters was heard spoken the old, old byword of the trade—'never a bronc that couldn't be rode.'

But the cynics were wrong as the riders

learned—the hard way. At Cajon Pass five riders tried their luck on this demon horse, Prairie Fire. None of them came even close to making a ride. One had a leg broken, another an arm. The other three were shaken up so badly they were useless the rest of the show.

At Bent's Junction, at Cherry Valley, Umpquah, Linerville, Sentinel City the riders signed up, made their try and rolled in the dust. The fame of Prairie Fire spread.

Men came to hate the big red horse and knew that in return he hated them—knew that he hated all men. A couple of the committee members at the Pine Ridge show, protested the horse, saying he was a vicious killer and that men should not be asked to try and ride him.

"You're wrong, gentlemen," Jack Dyer told them. "The horse isn't vicious as we understand the term. For fifteen years my business has been searching out and supplying the best bucking stock possible to find for these shows. I've seen all kinds of horses. A really vicious horse isn't a smart horse, any more than a vicious human is really intelligent. And Prairie Fire is smart, smart as a whip. I've watched the bronc from the first day he ever came out of a chute. He's tremendous, a tiger in action. But not vicious. It's just that he hates men—all men, and he wants no part of them. And when he finds one on his back he gets rid of that one just as quickly and thoroughly as possible. He hurts men only because he's the most punishing bucker I've ever seen."

The committee members were adamant and Prairie Fire was barred from entry. So the Pine Ridge show lost money, because spectator interest dropped. The word went out. People would pay money to see Prairie Fire in action. With the big red horse in action any rodeo was a real show, without him it was just another rodeo. It was the horse that had become the attraction, not the riders who tried to top him.

As for Blaze Face himself, life had become one long battle. At no time did he ever let up fighting men. Even on the moves between rodeos he was a problem and a headache for Jack Dyer and his men. His coat, which had once been shining, coppery silk, grew rough and scarred and scraped. He took on a wild, almost shaggy look. Yet inside he was sound and tough as rawhide.

Because he was smart he learned the tricks of the trade. He had learned to mix in with his straight explosive power a number of cunning maneuvers. Riders who had been up there for a few seconds swore that no other horse could drop his head and shoulders so far from sight. He had another trick of going into a mad spin and then dropping away to one side or the other with such speed and finesse as to leave the rider with the sensation of having no horse under him at all. And then, after one of these loosening up moves would come that tremendous, towering, upward leap with the explosive snap at the very crest of it, the snap that threw men like straws.

The months went by. Dozens of riders had their try at Prairie Fire. None of them made it stick. Along with his hatred of men this horse called Prairie Fire acquired a contempt for them. Puny men, trying to ride him—him! Only one man had ever ridden him and that one because the horse had wanted it so, because he had loved that man, because that man had brought something into his life which had meant much to him, companionship, understanding, unfailing kindness.

It had been a joy to serve that man, to do his bidding, to ride out far and interesting trails with him, to race along like the wild wind blowing, under that man, just in the sheer joy of living and movement. That man who used to talk to him in such a caressing way and who would whistle at him with that trilling bird call. Even in the depths of his hatred for all other men, there were so many times when the horse was heart-breakingly lonely for that other and only man.

The horse found little comfort in the companionship of other broncs of Jack Dyer's bucking string. At night in still another of these endless rodeo corrals, the big red fellow would stand apart from the others of his kind, and when old memories would come to mock him he would swing a high and restless head as though he were trying to see far distances and recognize something he had known in older, better days.

More than once had Jack Dyer himself seen the horse this way, and this hard headed dealer in horseflesh, the wilder and

more explosive the better, came to know a strange respect and something almost like affection for this big, red unconquerable star performer of his.

"Once someone rode you," murmured Dyer to himself. "When we went out and got you that day at that Red Slide cabin, after you'd killed that Lank Steuben, you bore signs of a saddle being used on you regular. You had a man, once. Your man—the only man. Somewhere, somehow you lost him or he lost you. And there'll never be another to take his place, as far as you're concerned. I've often wondered how Steuben and that other drifter got hold of you. I wish I knew."

THE windup of the season was at River Bend, the biggest show of the circuit. Here were the biggest arena, the biggest crowds, the best horses and the best riders. River Bend was a show that offered enough prize money to attract the top riders in the game. They came a long way to enter in the River Bend show. Spectators came a long way to see it.

Way back in the Blue Mesa country on the Long C ranch, Bill Chalfant was troubled. He was worried over his daughter, Mary. Her usual buoyant sparkle and verve were missing. The ranchhouse hadn't heard her bright, quick breaking laughter for months. Her eyes were brooding, her face pensive.

Bill Chalfant finally talked it over with Andy Gregg and Andy said quietly, "I know what's the matter with that girl of ours, Bill. It's Curt Powell."

"Curt Powell! Why that don't add up, Andy. Curt's been gone for months and months. We ain't heard a word from him since he left."

"That's just it," nodded Andy. "Neither has Mary. I saw the look on her face the day Curt rode away. And I knew right then that Mary realized that all the time she'd been trying to tell herself that it was Sig Loftus she was fond of, it was really Curt Powell who counted. You notice it wasn't two months after Curt left that Mary and Loftus had their big quarrel and Loftus quit and pulled out. What do you think her and Loftus rowed about?"

"Darned if I know," growled Chalfant. "I tried to find out from Mary but she wouldn't say a cussed word."

"Well, I know," Andy said. "They rowed over Curt Powell. I happened to be close enough to hear some of the talk. Mary had been discouraging Loftus' attentions and Loftus, mad, accused her of bein' lonesome for Curt. Mary, bless her heart, told him straight out that this might be true—and if it was why then it was her business and none of his. So Loftus drew his time, which I'll always say was darn good riddance."

"All of which ain't curin' anything around this ranch," gloomed Bill Chalfant. "It ain't good for a girl like Mary to act like she does. Why I ain't heard her laugh for so darn long . . . I find myself listenin' and hopin' for that old bright laughter, Andy—and it never comes. I got to do something about that girl."

"Why don't you get her away from the ranch?" suggested Andy. "Take her on a trip somewhere. Get her out among other folks for a change. Me and Shorty and Pete can run the ranch for a spell without you bein' on hand all the time. Yeah, take Mary on a trip. Do you both good."

"By gollies, I will!" exploded Bill Chalfant. "There's that big rodeo show at River Bend. Mary and me are goin' to take in that show."

"Now you're talkin'," approved Andy. Then he added drily, "You may run into Sig Loftus, for I hear he's hit the rodeo trail as a bronc twister. If you do, don't try and bring him back here. For there's one juniper I can do without ever seein' again. Shorty and Pete feel likewise."

It was a two day stage trip for Bill and Mary Chalfant to get to River Bend and when they arrived they found the town in a fever of pre-rodeo excitement. River Bend ran big, as cow-country towns went, and it was jammed with people. Bill Chalfant was lucky enough to get the last two hotel rooms.

He saw to it that Mary spent in her room little more than the time needed for sleep. All the rest of the time he had her out and about town and among people. That suited Mary, all right, for it gave her a chance to constantly scan faces, hoping that one of them would turn out to be a lean, young brown one that she had come to remember so well. Mary saw plenty of young faces, lean ones and brown ones, but none of them belong to Curt Powell.

Bill Chalfant heard a lot of talk about the wonder horse of the rodeo outfit, a

horse called Prairie Fire, a big red horse that couldn't be rode.

"I want to see that bronc in action," he told Mary. "They tell me the longest any twister has stayed with that hoss so far has been six seconds. Nobody has ridden him for the ten count yet. They say if he ain't rode in this show, then he'll never be, for Abe Stanley and Bart McGraw are entered. They're two of the best there is. If they can't top the bronc then I'm willin' to admit nobody can."

Mary nodded, but said nothing. She was thinking of a big red horse named Blaze Face and a lean young rider who had ridden him away one day and never came back.

Andy Gregg's prophecy that Chalfant might run across Sig Loftus turned out to be true. Chalfant, having seen Mary to her room for the night, took a final turn up and down the street while he smoked a final cigar.

He literally bumped into Loftus as the latter came out of a saloon, the reek of whiskey on him.

Loftus, his ready temper edged by the liquor he'd taken on, started to curse at Chalfant before he recognized him. Chalfant caught him up crisply. "Easy, Sig. Watch yourself!"

Loftus mumbled a moment, then blurted, "If you're aimin' to ask me back to ride for you, save your breath, Chalfant. I ain't interested. I'm in a better game."

Bill Chalfant really saw Sig Loftus for the first time at that moment. His eyes flashed contempt. "Andy Gregg—and Mary, showed swell judgment, Loftus. Don't worry—I wouldn't have you back on a bet."

Chalfant turned his back and walked away.

At that moment a late stage wheeled into town. Among the passengers who got off and lost themselves in the crowd was a lean, quiet young rider who moved a little slowly and was still gaunt and slightly sunken of eye. It had taken Curt Powell's last dollar to buy that stage ride into River Bend. But this was a rodeo that attracted horse men from all directions and long distances. Maybe, Curt reasoned, if he talked to enough of them he might run across one who could tell him of the whereabouts of a big red horse named Blaze Face.

CHAPTER V

Riding Pards

BLARING through his big megaphone came the voice of the announcer. Various horses came out of the chutes, with various riders up on them. Jigsaw, Step-toe, Nevada Blue, Rockaway, Dinky Dozen. These were some of the horses. Bart McGraw, Hack White, Abe Stanley, Lonnie Parks, Jim Munger, Sig Loftus. These were some of the riders.

There were top rides, there were good rides, there were bad ones. Action was fast and furious, horses squealing and winding through the dust, riders humping and tossing atop the whirlwind. Some stayed up, some didn't. Pick up riders were busy. The crowd rumbled and roared, applauded and jeered. Again and again the timer's gun cracked thinly and in their stand the judges conferred and made decisions.

To them who knew the signs it became quickly apparent that three riders would fight it out for top honors. Abe Stanley, Bart McGraw and Sig Loftus. These three made the run of the mill broncs look easy. The crowd began a roar. "Bring on Prairie Fire! Where's that Prairie Fire horse?"

Sig Loftus drew him first. Loftus' ego was at its height. The applause the crowd had given him on the several good rides he had made was food and drink to him. He felt invincible. Abe Stanley, a gentleman and a real sportsman, dropped Loftus a word of advice. "I've never tried this Prairie Fire bronc yet, but I've talked to a lot of good boys who have, and they tell me he's like no other bronc that ever lived. Get set for the toughest journey of your life, friend."

Sig Loftus laughed jeeringly. "These rodeo goats are all the same. They have a little bag of learned tricks, and that's all. They buck from habit and quit at the gun."

Abe Stanley shrugged. "Remember I told you."

As Sig Loftus climbed the side of the chute and lowered himself into his saddle

he noted only that this was a big, rough coated red horse. Well, there were lots of such in the world. He couldn't see anything about this one to make it such an exception. But that was because he could not see into this horse's mind and heart.

The announcer lifted his megaphone. "Coming out of chute three—Prairie Fire—with Sig Loftus up! Watch the chute!"

The gate slammed back. A great red horse lunged into view, went up in a towering leap, came down, seemed to slide half out from under his rider, then again went into that tremendous, reaching leap with the terrific snap at the peak of it. Sig Loftus landed flat on his back, fifteen feet away.

A marveling chute hand said, "When that bronc throws 'em—he really throws 'em!"

The crowd gasped, roared, cheered the horse and jeered Sig Loftus as, shaken and dazed, he got to his feet and lurched to the corral fence. A lond standing debt was evened at that moment. Those jeers whipped Sig Loftus' ego as it had never been whipped before. Prairie Fire, with almost contemptuous ease, had made a spectacle of Loftus before all these watching hundreds.

Bart McGraw was the next unfortunate. Bart was doing all right until the red horse dropped his head and shoulders completely from the rider's sight then turned on the old explosive power leap. The crowd didn't jeer Bart McGraw, because he crawled up out of the dust, pointed to the horse and shook his clasped hands above his head. It was an accolade by one of the best of riders to the great horse that threw him.

To Abe Stanley, Bart flashed a twisted grin and said, "Good luck, boy. You'll need it. You haven't lived until you've tried to sit that chunk of thunder and sudden death. That there is the greatest bronc I ever tackled."

Abe Stanley was one of the best because he rode with his head as well as his tempered body and steely legs. He had watched both Sig Loftus and Bart McGraw in their tries and tried to figure the action of this Prairie Fire horse. Most broncs had their own peculiar style when they came unhinged. If a rider could figure out that style, he had a good starting edge. But Abe had seen nothing about Prairie Fire to help him. He was grave of eye and grim of face as he got ready for his big trial.

Up in the stands, Mary Chalfant was tugging at her father's sleeve. "That horse, Dad—that Prairie Fire? Could it be Blaze Face? The markings are the same and the way it bucks. Could it be?"

Bill Chalfant shook his head. "Lots of red broncs with blaze faces in the world, Mary. Besides, you know as well as I do that Curt Powell wouldn't never have let go of Blaze Face as long as he lived."

DOWN at the far end of the arena, Curt Powell stood with a lot of other impecunious folks who, by hook or crook had got into the rodeo grounds, but could not afford a seat in the stands. The man standing next to Curt thought Curt was sick, for Curt was clinging with shaking hands to the top rail of the arena and was saying over and over, "It's him. It's Blaze Face. My Blaze Face horse. Old Blaze Face—and they're doing this to him!"

Curt pulled away, fought through the crowd and headed around the edge of the arena for the chutes at a shaky run. Those kindly Shoshone Indians had saved Curt's life, but the loss of blood and the long time he had lain without care had taken him down to the very edge of death, so far down that the trail back had been long and slow and difficult.

Before Curt could reach the chutes, Abe Stanley had gone out on Prairie Fire. Abe came closer than any man had before. Abe stayed up there for a full eight seconds. The crowd was roaring madly, thinking he was going to make it. The timer had already lifted his gun. Two seconds away from glory, was Abe Stanley. Then the old fall away and tremendous snapping leap did the trick. Abe was in the dust. Prairie Fire was still the horse that hadn't been rode.

To Bart McGraw, who came out to dust him off, Abe said, "If all broncs were as good as that one, this would be a good trade to leave alone, Bart. I feel like I'd been shook loose from my eye teeth."

The roar of the crowd thinned down. The pickup riders were having trouble cornering Prairie Fire. And then, clear and sharp above every other sound came a trilling, birdlike whistle. Again and again it sounded, and it seemed to take

some time before it broke through the consciousness of the big red horse with the empty saddle, that was circling and dodging the pickup riders.

But abruptly the big, intelligent head snapped up and from dusty nostrils came an answer, ringing like a clarion over all the arena and the humanity packed stands. Blaze Face had heard—and remembered!

Curt Powell was over the arena fence, walking out into the open, the trilling whistle breaking again and again from his pursed lips. Blaze Face shook his head, stamped, moved forward at a trot. One of the pickup riders stopped his fellow worker.

"Hold it, Joe! Hold it! Something is goin' on here. Let's watch this!"

Everybody was watching now. The stands grew still, breathless. Roustabouts and chute hands who had seen Prairie Fire in action many times, stood open mouthed and unbelieving. Jack Dyer stood with them, a gleam in his eye, a slow smile on his lips.

"It's his man," he murmured. "His man that's come back to him. And that great horse remembers."

Curt Powell kept on whistling. It was very hard to do because of the lump in his throat and he had to blink the mist from his eyes. But there was Blaze Face—old Blaze Face out there, coming toward him with pricked ears and high head.

A dozen feet away, the horse stopped. Curt whistled again, then spoke. "Yeah, it's me, old-timer. They took you away from me, but now you're back. This is your pal, Blaze Face—remember? You and me—and the good trails we used to ride. Come in, boy. Come in!"

Curt whistled again and Blaze Face came in, slowly but steadily. He sniffed Curt's outstretched hand and then, as Curt stepped up and slid an arm across his neck, the horse let out a great, weary sigh and rubbed his forehead up and down against Curt's shoulder.

Curt said, "Somebody claims to own you, Big Feller. But we got to prove you're mine. With everybody watchin', there's one sure way to prove it. You got to let me sit that saddle."

Curt reached for the empty stirrup and swung up into Abe Stanley's saddle. Blaze Face stood like a rock. Then, at another word from Curt he paced slowly up the arena, past stands of people who didn't understand this thing at all with their minds, but which they understood thoroughly with their hearts. They broke into a tumult of cheering such as that arena had never known before.

JACK DYER handed Curt a piece of paper. "Here it is, friend for what it is worth. A bill of ownership. That horse is yours. I don't know how you lost him, but I'm glad you got him back. I'd give my right arm to have a great horse like that fellow remember me like he has you. There'll be no more Prairie Fire. He's retired, an undefeated champ. I'm glad for the bronc. He'll know peace and contentment, now. But I'd still like to know how you ever lost him."

Curt told the story, how a shot from the dark had cut him down beside his campfire, how the Indians had found and taken care of him. Jack Dyer's eyes narrowed. "Tell me," he asked, "did you ever see a pock-marked, slant-eyed lookin' feller hangin' round the horse?"

"There was one like you describe who tried to buy Blaze Face off me," said Curt.

"Ah!" said Dyer, "that's the answer. Lank Steuben, he was the one. I think you can thank him for that shot in the back. But you don't need to go hunting for him. The horse took care of Lank Steuben. He tried to ride him and the horse threw him so high and far Steuben broke his neck when he landed. Yeah, the horse evened up for you. He's that kind of a bronc. Take care of him, always. Good luck to both of you."

And Jack Dyer pushed away through the crowd, poorer by loss of the best rodeo bucker he had ever run across, but rich in satisfaction over the things that really counted.

Curt Powell got away from the crowd finally, moving away into a quiet spot down by the river, with Blaze Face pacing along at his shoulder. "We haven't got a red cent, Big Feller," Curt told him. "But we got each other, so we'll make out. I'll have to ride you bareback for a time, until I can round up a job and get enough money together to buy us a saddle. I sure got a lot of currying to do to bring you back to what you were."

Blaze Face whickered softly. Every-

thing was all right with him, it seemed. The great loneliness was gone, the great hate faded. All he had known before with this one man was back strong and fresh in him again. He began to graze.

Curt didn't know another soul was around until he heard her voice.

"Curt!"

He whirled, and there she stood. "Mary!" His voice went husky. "What—how?"

She told him, gravely, quietly. "We'll be heading home in the morning. Dad wants you to come back to the ranch, Curt—you and Blaze Face."

"How about you, Mary?"

Her eyes were level, steady. "And I want you too. You might as well know—I never wanted you to leave. Oh, Curt—when I saw you walk out into that arena, you'll never know what it meant to me."

"But I thought it was Sig Loftus."

"It never was—really. You'll come, Curt?"

He took both her hands in his. "Just as fast as Blaze Face can carry me. You think your Pa will stand for a little advance in wages so I can get me a saddle?"

Mary laughed softly as she came into his arms. "From the way he yelled when you whistled Blaze Face up to you out there in the arena, I think you can ask for half the ranch."

"I might ask for his daughter. In fact, I'm goin' to."

"I can answer that, myself. And I am answering, now."

She kissed him.

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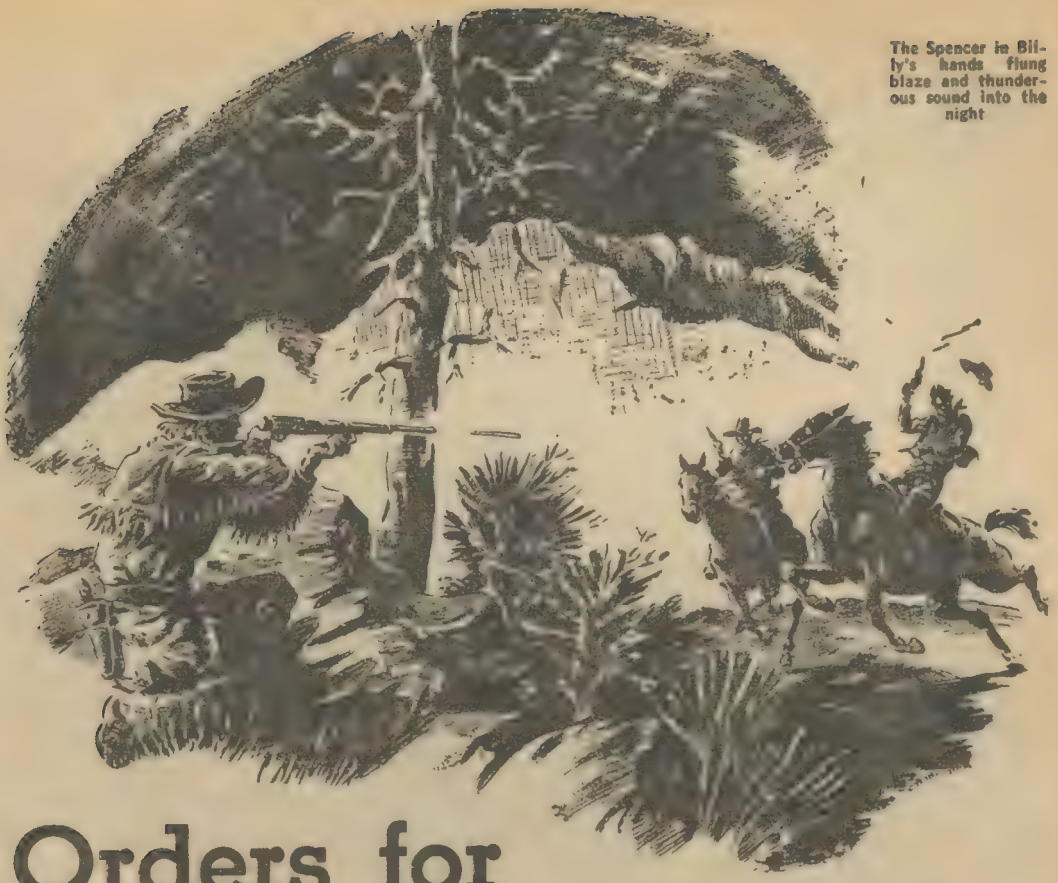
THE next issue will also contain many other stories and features—including TEXAS TRIGGER CHAMP, a true story by John A. Thompson, plus a Buffalo Billy Bates yarn by Scott Carleton and a Ham and Egg howler by Alfred L. Garry. From cover to cover, the next POPULAR WESTERN will be a swell reading feast—look forward to it!



The Spencer in Billy's hands flung blaze and thunderous sound into the night

Orders for a Buckskin Man

Mary Smith, the girl said her name was—but Bates had other ideas about this white beauty he met in an Indian camp!

CACKLING laughter of squaws and the shrill yelps of excited Indian children coming suddenly out of the black night jolted "Buffalo Billy" Bates out of a half doze. Billy snapped erect in the saddle, halting his fast bay gelding. He was on a crooked ridge, and there was a canyon on either side of him, slicing away through these rough ridges that were the cedar brakes on the very edge of the Great Plains.

The cackling squaws and shouting children were in the canyon on Billy's right, and some distance off.

Billy was bone-weary, and in no mood to waste time. He had come all the way from Fort Fetterman, traveling only at night, since every mile he had ridden had been through territory that was swarming with rampaging Sioux and Cheyennes.

"This ridge will take us smack above those Indians, boy," Billy muttered, pat-

a Buffalo Billy story by SCOTT CARLETON

ting his bay's neck. "If they're Kiowas we'd not be in any danger, even if they saw or heard us. But if that happened to be a band of Sioux or Cheyennes and we blundered onto them, there'd be trouble, sure as thunder!"

Billy eased his stalwart body in the saddle by taking his weight on one moccasin-clad foot. It was hot up here in the cedar brakes, and his fringed buckskins stuck to him in damp folds. He pulled the beaver hat off his head and sat there, flicking the shoulder-length, chestnut-colored hair away from his sweaty face and neck as he tried to decide what to do.

"Cuttin' off across these canyons would get me into rough goin', that's sure," he grumbled. "Still, if those war whoops happened to be hostile instead of friendly Kiowas—"

Billy sighed resignedly, and slid out of the saddle. He touched the stock of the Spencer repeating rifle in the scabbard on his saddle, then changed his mind, thinking the brass-bound Dragoon Colt at his belt would be weapon enough. Scout and plainsman that he was, Billy would never ride off without first having investigated those Indians in the canyon below him.

Billy was six feet tall and rangy of build, yet he moved with amazing silence as he went down the ridge. He saw the faint smudge of firelight when he passed the point where the canyon turned, but the slope here was so heavily timbered that he would be obliged to go down a considerable distance if he wanted to come within sight of the Indians.

He descended several hundred feet when he stopped so suddenly his moccasins skidded a little. He had been hearing the squaws and children laugh and jabber without paying any particular attention. But suddenly one squaw's voice was lifted in a gleeful shout, and Billy Bates felt a chill of apprehension run along his spine.

"See!" the squaw had shouted. "The white squaw angers because I wear her dress!"

"Sioux, by thunder!" Billy whispered tensely.

Born on the Frontier, reared and educated by the famous scout and hunter, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Billy Bates spoke many Indian tongues, among them the Sioux. And that squaw had shouted in the Sioux dialect, of that, Billy was certain.

Suddenly Billy forgot the weariness of his long, hard ride as he moved down the slope again. He saw the firelight growing brighter, and dropped flat to the ground when he realized that he was nearing a meadow at the very base of the slope.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Billy breathed, halting under the last fringe of cedars.

Before him was an open valley, with only scattered trees here and there. Perhaps twenty yards from where he lay was a water hole, and beside it were several fires. Billy's eyes bulged slowly as he saw Sioux squaws prancing and cavorting in gay mockery. Some of the Indian women had on lace-trimmed petticoats, some wore high-heeled shoes that made them reel and giggle, and others wore such pieces of feminine apparel as shirtwaists, long stockings, silk garters and tailored jackets.

But there was something else.

BILLY was staring now at the white girl who cowered at the bole of a small tree. She sat with her back to the tree and her arms had been drawn behind her, tied securely. Her hair was loose, spilling in a golden cascade over her slim shoulders. A small trunk, a bandbox and several leather bags were on the ground near the girl. Pieces of her clothing were scattered all around them.

He took his eyes away from the girl at last, glancing at the brush-and-skin shelters that were visible beyond the fires. There were many of them, and suddenly Billy knew, with a sense of shock, that this was a permanent camp, and a big one.

"Countin' squaws, kids and all, there'd be close to two hundred Indians in a camp that size," he muttered. "But where in thunder are the bucks?"

Billy's tawny eyes roved and probed, but not a buck could he sight. Then he looked back at the girl and barely smothered a yelp of surprise. She had changed position while he was looking elsewhere, and now the firelight was full in her small, terrified face.

"Colonel Bruce Downing's daughter, so help me!" Billy whispered tensely. "If that isn't the girl who posed for the photograph the colonel is so proud of, I'll eat my own hat! Wilma, I've heard him call her."

Billy fell to studying the Indian camp again. He still saw no bucks anywhere,

and was toying with the notion of pulling his Dragoon, scattering the squaws and children with a burst of firing. But he shook his head, discarding that idea in a hurry. Squaws could become dangerous on mighty short notice. And about the first thing they would do, in case someone tried to rescue that girl, would be snatch up club or hatchet and cave her skull in.

He eased back into the timber, traveled a hundred yards down the canyon, then moved boldly out into the open, swinging back to the camp but keeping out of the fire glow. He still had no plan, and was beginning to wonder if he would be able to formulate a workable one at all, when the snarling of dogs drew his attention.

Billy swerved quickly towards the sounds, moving fast. The dogs were quarrelsome, guarding some prized treasure.

"The Sioux meat cache is what they're guardin', I hope!" Billy was thinking.

The dogs came at him in a swarm when he drew close. Billy spoke softly to them in the Sioux language, and soon they were getting under his feet in their eagerness to be friendly. Then Billy spied the meat cache, which was simply a long pole extending between two forked saplings. The pole was a dozen or so feet above the ground, and as Billy came beneath it he could see dark, irregular objects hung close to the pole.

He shinnied up one of the saplings, took hold of the pole that was cradled in the tree crotches, and lifted it out. He glanced toward the fires, then turned his attention to the meat-hung pole, heaving it away from him.

There was an instant bedlam of barking and yelping as the dogs piled onto the meat, and by the time Billy got to the ground the dogs were in a free-for-all. The Sioux women, charged with caring for all foodstuffs, knew what the sudden fighting among their dogs meant. They headed for the meat cache in a high lope, their children racing along with them.

Billy Bates sped through the night, circling outside the fire glow. He came in behind the white girl at the tree, dropped to the ground and began crawling after he was within the fire's light.

"Don't cry out or anything, girl!" he called hoarsely.

"Oh, thank Heaven!" he heard the girl say shakily, and was glad that she did not attempt to look around.

Billy plucked a scalping knife from a scabbard on his belt, slid in behind the girl and carefully cut the thongs on her wrists. He pushed the knife back into its sheath, glancing out through the shadows toward the spot from where came the sounds of raging squaws and howling dogs.

"All right, girl!" Billy said tensely. "Don't get up. Just roll over, crawl around the tree."

She came around the tree like a frightened squirrel, looking up at Billy out of blue eyes that seemed enormous. He smiled reassuringly at her, white teeth flashing beneath the mustache that was still inclined to silkiness because of his youth.

"I'm Mary Smith, sir!" the girl said in a small tight voice.

"What?" Billy exclaimed. "Mary Smith? But I thought—"

BREAKING off his speech, Billy shot an uneasy glance towards the spot where squaws and dogs were still making a hideous racket. Seeing the beautiful young woman at such close range, he was more soundly convinced than ever that she was Wilma Downing, Colonel Bruce Downing's daughter. But Billy had no intention of arguing the matter at the moment.

"Let's go!" he said huskily.

He dropped beside the girl, showed her how to slide along over the ground, head held low. Soon they were on the slope, well within the protective screen of cedars before the girl's escape was discovered.

"*Aiiii!*" a squaw howled wildly. "The white girl is gone! She is not at the tree where we left her!"

Billy chuckled, got to his feet and helped the girl up. She was trembling, and he was surprised at the way she jerked her arm free of his grip.

"I'm very much in your debt, yet I can't help resenting your amusement, sir!" she said stiffly.

"I find no amusement over the ordeal you've been through, Miss," Billy said quietly. "I was laughing at what that squaw yelled."

"You can understand that silly jabber?" the girl asked sharply.

"Those Indians are Sioux, and I speak

the tongue well," Billy said simply. "Let's get out of here before those she-devils gather their wits and start hunting you."

"I'm sorry I misunderstood your laughter," the girl said. "Those bronzed hussies, parading in pieces of my clothing! Here, give me your arm. I can keep on my feet much better if I hold on to you."

Billy felt the girl take a firm hold on his arm, and was starting up the slope when one of the squaws down in the canyon began wailing at the top of her lungs.

"This is the work of evil spirits, I tell you!" the squaw was howling. "The white girl was not strong enough to break those strips of skin. Yet she is gone. We must find her, or Crippled Foot will order our men to beat us!"

"Crippled Foot!" Billy gasped, and stumbled, almost jerking the girl off her balance.

"Oh, how terrible!" she said quickly. "Have you hurt the foot badly?"

"No, no!" Billy gulped. "I didn't mean that I had hurt a foot. That squaw you no doubt heard yellin' was sayin' that Crippled Foot would order their husbands to beat them for letting you escape."

"And I hope their husbands do a good job of that beating, too!" the girl said gravely.

"Girl, you've no idea what a close squeak you've had!" Billy said. "That Crippled Foot devil is one of the most bloodthirsty Indians on this Frontier! The army has been after him for almost five years for his depredations against white settlers, miners and traders. General Crook and General Merritt both think Crippled Foot and his murderous band died in a blizzard that trapped them in a canyon, far north of here, last winter."

"You're an army scout?" the girl asked quickly.

"In a way, yes," Billy replied. "I do a lot of work for the army—scoutin', carryin' dispatches and so on. But I take orders only from the chief of all scouts, Bill Cody."

"Why, you're Buffalo Billy Bates!" the girl cried. "I should have known you the moment I saw you."

"I'm Billy Bates," the scout replied. "But how did you know?"

"Mother and I not only saw Mr. Cody on the stage back east last winter, but he happens to be a family friend and called on us," the girl explained. "He told us all about you."

"Bill would probably gloss over the real help he's been to me," Billy said soberly. "While there's actually only eleven or so years difference in our ages, Bill Cody has been like a father to me. I can never repay him, I know. But I try to do what Bill asks me to, even when he gives me a vexin' job like the one I was sent down here to do."

"You don't seem happy over your assignment," the girl observed. "Is it a secret mission?"

"There's no secret to it," Billy answered readily. "An old bumble-head named Bruce Downing lost something down here, and Bill Cody told me to come find what Downing lost."

AS HE grinned into the darkness, Billy knew the girl could not see the expression. He heard her catch her breath sharply, felt her break stride, tighten her grip on his arm for support.

"Well!" she said sharply. "I'm sure Colonel Downing would be interested to know that you consider him a bumble-head, Mr. Bates!"

"And just how, Miss Smith, did you happen to know that Bruce Downing is a colonel?" Billy asked drily.

"Why, I—That is—Well, you see, Mr. Bates—" She floundered to a halt when Billy chuckled drily.

"Never mind," he said quickly. "I hear some of those squaws at the foot of this slope, behind us. We'd better cut out the talk and concentrate on gettin' to my horse."

The girl seemed willing enough to drop the conversation. If there had been any slightest doubt in Billy's mind as to whether or not she was Colonel Bruce Downing's daughter, that doubt was gone now.

Billy could hear the squaws prowling the slope behind him. They were not close enough to worry the scout, yet he said nothing about that as he moved up along the ridge to his horse.

"Up you go!" he told the girl, and lifted her, sat her in the saddle.

Billy hopped up behind the saddle, reached past the girl and picked up the reins. He walked the gelding back along

the ridge for a half mile, then slanted down the slope into the canyon. The girl's breathing had quieted now, and Billy saw her fussing with her hair, getting it done into a single, heavy braid.

"Runnin' into this Crippled Foot and his bunch down here gives me a tougher problem to solve than I figured I'd have, Miss," Billy spoke quietly. "Would you mind tellin' me exactly how those war whoops got hold of you today?"

"How did you know they got hold of me only today?" She turned her head, looked back and up into his shadowed face.

"You had been in that camp only a very short while," Billy said patiently. "Those squaws had just unpacked your luggage, to begin havin' sport with bits of your clothing. You had not been tied to that tree long enough to have grown cramped and tired."

"It seemed that I was in that horrible camp a lifetime!" the girl shuddered. "But actually, I was taken into camp just at dusk by the painted, screaming savages who murdered poor Mr. Tucker and his wife, then forced me to climb out of the wagon and accompany them."

"Where were you when you were captured?" Billy asked.

"Out on the plains," the girl told him. "Four days ago, at a trading post and settlement, I hired a man and his wife to take me to Fort Fetterman. We planned to make the whole trip by wagon."

"Fort Fetterman!" Billy cried. "Girl, have you any idea how far it is from here to Fort Fetterman, and what kind of danger you'd have been in every mile of the way?"

"I started the trip fully aware of the distance and of the dangers, Mr. Bates!" the girl replied crisply. "Mr. Garland, who owns a trading post at the settlement I mentioned, was opposed to my going. So were the settlers and their wives. But Mr. Tucker was an experienced frontiersman and said he could get me safely to the fort. His wife was a full-blooded Indian, and he said she would be able to make any band of savages we might encounter understand that we were to be let alone."

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Billy growled harshly. "Young lady, there's more to this than is showin' on the surface. The Mr. Tucker you mentioned would have been Ott Tucker, a lanky, hatchet-faced cuss with shaggy black hair and black eyes. Didn't he have a couple of friends named Riley Ford and Jack Hill who put their oars into the deal somehow?"

"Mr. Ford and Mr. Hill were there at the trading post," the girl replied. "Mr. Tucker *did* ask them to go to Fort Fetterman with us. But they had just come from Santa Fe with a string of pack mules, and were going among the Kiowas to trade."

"All of which was nothin' more than a bunch of lies and pretenses, calculated to fool you!" Billy declared. "Riley Ford, Jack Hill and Ott Tucker are three of the worst white renegades along this Frontier. They make a business of peddlin' guns and whisky to the Indians. I don't doubt that those three renegades sold you into captivity today!"

AT BILLY'S statement, the girl tensed in the saddle.

"That's ridiculous!" she cried. "Mr. Ford and Mr. Hill went on to the Kiowa villages to attend to their trading. Mr. Tucker and his wife, Sally, were the only people with me when those Indians came swarming out of the hills, late this afternoon, and opened fire on us."

"Ott Tucker put up a fight?" Billy asked suspiciously.

"The poor man had no chance!" the girl said sharply. "He fell from the wagon seat at the very first volley. His wife jumped out of the wagon, and I saw her fall, too."

"All right, we won't argue it," Billy said bluntly. "But I have a hunch Riley Ford and those two pards of his, Jack Hill and Ott Tucker, cooked up this whole deal. It so happens, little lady, that Colonel Downing caught those three renegades slipping into the Sioux country north of here, with a batch of guns and whisky.

"That was a year ago, and the colonel did his best to get Ford and those other two rakes sent over the road. They wiggled free by swearin' they were headed for a Black Hills minin' camp with the guns and whisky. 'But they swore they'd get even with the colonel for the scare and trouble he gave them."

"Why are you telling me about Colonel

Downing's trouble with those three men, Mr. Bates?" the girl asked, and her voice sounded uneasy.

"Because I think they knew you," Billy said quietly, "and saw a chance to live up to their brags that they'd make Colonel Downing sorry that he tried to send them to prison."

"Whatever do you mean by that?" the girl cried.

"I know that you are Wilma Downing," Billy told her bluntly. "Ford and those two pals of his evidently recognized you, and set out to get even with your father by turnin' you over to the Indians."

"Oh, my heavens!" the girl wailed. "Aren't you just making guesses, Billy Bates?"

"I'm not guessing," Billy answered. "Your father is mighty proud of that photograph you sent him last Christmas. The colonel has shown that picture of you to many people, Miss Wilma. The three renegades have no doubt seen it many times, for they hung around Fort Fetterman a lot this Spring."

"All right, Billy Bates!" the girl said, almost angrily. "I *am* Wilma Downing! Because I'm a girl, my father has refused to allow me to come to the Frontier, contending that life out here is far too rough and dangerous. I came out using the name 'Mary Smith' because I did not want people helping me simply because I am Colonel Downing's daughter. Therefore, Mr. Bates, you are to take me to Fort Fetterman, promptly and without argument, if you please!"

"Just like that, eh?" Billy laughed drily. "Orders for a buckskin man!"

"And what's wrong with my requesting that you see me safely to the fort?" Wilma Downing asked sharply.

"Several things!" Billy snorted. "In the first place, I take orders only from Bill Cody. Bill sent me down here to pick up somethin' your father sent by error, you might say. I'll take care of that mission before I consider anything else. Then there's Crippled Foot and those murderin' renegades of his to consider."

"Tommyrot!" the girl said sharply. "Whatever it was my father lost, sent in error, or whatnot, couldn't be so very important."

"Judgin' by some of the remarks I heard your father make, I'll have to admit that he does not consider the lieutenant, Tom Marple, he sort of sent down here very important," Billy chuckled. "The lieutenant came out here a few months back, straight from the Point, and so full of notions as to how the army should operate he can't listen to his superiors."

WILMA DOWNING gasped. She held her breath for a long moment before she allowed herself to speak.

"Why did my father send Tommy down into this horrible country all alone? And if you must know, Mr. Bates, Tommy Marple and I are engaged."

"No wonder that fool kid couldn't behave himself!" Billy grunted.

"Fool kid!" the girl retorted. "Mr. Bates, I hope you're not referring to Lieutenant Marple with such an uncomplimentary remark."

"I referred to Lieutenant Tom Marple!" Billy said bluntly. "He came out here and began acting as if your father was a chum, not his commanding officer. Colonel Downing was embarrassed, to say the least. He finally sent Marple down here on scout patrol, and said he hoped a hitch at field duty would jolt a little sense into the kid."

"And Tommy has disappeared!" the girl cried. "I shall never forgive father for this! Tommy has been slaughtered by the beastly Indians!"

Billy's reply was a smothered cry of alarm. He slid off the horse, reached up and lifted the girl down to the ground.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"Quiet!" Billy whispered. "Just look dead ahead, yonder, towards the top of that ridge. There are riders up there, outlined against the sky. They're very probably the Sioux bucks, heading back for that camp we just left. Just thank your lucky stars that there's a canyon between us and them."

"Look!" the girl gasped. "They're riding this way!"

"So they are!" Billy droned uneasily.

He stepped forward, caught his gelding's bit ring, and stood with his hand on the bay's fluttering nostrils to prevent the horse from whinnying. Indians were down in the canyon directly below him now, and he felt goosepimples form along his spine when he heard their harsh voices.

"Sioux, all right!" he whispered to the

girl. "And that buck who was just talkin' said something about the white man's soldier-warriors—meanin' the army."

"They're coming right towards us!" the girl said in a terrified whisper.

"They've stopped in that canyon, which may be even worse," Billy told the girl in a low tone. "They're settin' an ambush for somebody, sure as thunder. And we don't dare try to get out of here, or they'll hear —Listen!"

From the canyon bottom, some two hundred feet below Billy and the girl, had come a harsh note of gloating laughter, then a white man's voice.

"This'll do the trick, Crippled Foot!" the white man was saying. "Get these braves of yores strung out along the brush here, and tell 'em to keep quiet. Me and Ott Tucker will push on to yore camp and get the Downing gal. When Jack Hill fetches that fancypants Lieutenant Marple over that ridge top yonder at daylight, we'll make the gal sing out to the lieutenant. While the lieutenant and them snoopin' soldiers of his are millin' around on that open slope, you and yore braves can kill every one of 'em before they know what's happenin'!"

"You are the wise fighter, and the good friend," a guttural voice declared in broken English. "Go bring white squaw."

"She'll shore be surprised to lay them purty eyes o' hers on me!" a nasal voice cackled. "Me and that Sally squaw of mine fell down in the grass and acted like we was shore kilt when you and yore bunch made that run at our wagon today, Crippled Foot."

Billy Bates had seized the astonished girl, put his hand over her mouth. She cowered close to him and he could feel her trembling violently.

"That coarse-voiced galoot down there is Riley Ford," Billy whispered in the girl's ear. "I reckon you recognized Ott Tucker's voice when he was gabbin' about how him and his squaw played dead today while the Indians captured you. If I take my hand off your mouth, will you keep your wits and not talk loud?"

The golden head so close to Billy's face bobbed, and he removed his palm from the girl's lips. She clung to his arm, and he could feel her hands shake and tighten as two horses began climbing the slope.

"They're goin' to run smack into us!" he husked to the girl. "Slide under that cedar, there, curl yourself around the bole, and stay there regardless of what goes on."

TO BILLY'S relief, the girl darted to the bush, dropped to the ground and scrambled back beneath the low-swinging boughs. And she was barely out of sight when the mounts of burly Riley Ford and lanky, hatchet-faced Ott Tucker rounded a clump of brush and stopped, ten yards down the slope.

"Say, somthin' is spookin' these broncs!" Ford's deep voice boomed out.

"Cougar, likely," Ott Tucker grunted. "Come on, let's go get the Downing filly. I want to see the look on her purty face when I tell her how me and you and Jack are gettin' even with her daddy."

Billy Bates had snaked the Spencer rifle from the saddle boot, slid a half dozen paces to the left of his mount and the girl.

"Ford, you and Ott Tucker freeze!" he said coldly.

"Riley, look out!" Tucker bawled. "It's that Bates whelp, shore as sin! Gun the pup afore—"

Tucker's voice was drowned in a double burst of pistol fire as Riley Ford flipped a pair of cap-and-ball revolvers from holsters and shot at the spot where he thought Billy was hiding. But Billy had moved to the right the moment he quit speaking, and now the Spencer in his hands flung blaze and thunderous sound into the night.

Billy could not see the rifle sights, but was depending upon instinct to place the slugs where he wanted them go. A bullet blistered his left cheek, and he felt another tug along the right side of his buckskin jacket. But Ott Tucker went backwards out of the saddle under the hammering impact of a mighty blow, dropping a smoking pistol as he fell.

Then Billy snapped a quick shot at Riley Ford's big bulk with the last cartridge in the long gun, and saw Ford spill out of the saddle, heard him moaning oaths as he hit the ground.

Billy wheeled to his horse, dug cartridges out of a saddle pocket and jammed them into the hot rifle. Coming up out the canyon, howling in excitement, were the Sioux Indians who had meant to ambush Lieutenant Tom Marple and his detach-

ment of a dozen yellowlegs at dawn.

"Billy?" the girl's voice, strained and fear-filled, came through the night.

"I'm all right, girl!" the scout said gruffly. "But here come the Indians, and I'll have a tussle with them. If somethin' happens to me, you crawl out of there, get on this hoss, and burn the breeze for Homer Garland's tradin' post. Understand?"

"Don't let anything happen to you, Billy!" the girl whimpered.

The Indians were bunched up, heading towards the spot where they had heard the shooting, coming as fast as their ponies could scramble up the steep, rough slope.

Off to the side, Billy dropped to his knees, point-aimed the Spencer and knocked the leader tumbling off his horse with the first shot.

Guns blazed at Billy from the Sioux horde, and he began a darting, weaving battle through the brush along the slope, taking the screeching devils farther and farther away from his horse and Wilma Downing. Then, to Billy's astonishment, the firing stopped and he was aware of a strange, hoarse wailing among the savages.

He frantically jammed fresh shells into the rifle, then crouched there, waiting and listening, holding his own fire.

"Our chief has died!" the cry went up. "The medicine of that lone warrior we fight is too strong! Our bullets miss, while his strike down our chief!"

"I am Hunts Alone, son of him you call Long Hair," Billy called out in Sioux. "Will you take Crippled Foot and give him the burial a chief deserves, or will you stand chattering like frightened birds until the army warriors ride down on you?"

"You I know, Hunts Alone!" came a guttural reply. "You are a great fighter. We take our dead chief and go in sadness."

Billy waited there, crouched and alert for tricks. But the Indians were soon gone, bemoaning the death of their leader as they filed slowly into the canyon with the body.

BILLY moved soundlessly through the night. To his exceptionally keen ears had come the panting, grunting voice of a wounded man, and the tall scout was drifting toward those sounds like a shadow moving through the brush. When he was within a yard of the man, he stopped, a mirthless smile touching his lips as he heard hoarse cursing.

"Billy Bates!" Riley Ford's voice croaked out suddenly. "I heard yuh jabberin' to them Injuns, blast yuh. Where are yuh at?"

"Right here," Billy said, and wanted to laugh at the way Ford bawled out in profane alarm. "And don't start reachin' for a gun!"

"I ain't reachin' for no gun!" Ford groaned. "Yuh busted my right arm with a slug, and I'm too sick to fight any more."

"Billy!" the girl called out thinly. "I hear your voice, so you must be all right. May I come over to you?"

"Come ahead, girl," Billy called.

She came to him a few moments later, breathing hard as she took hold of his arm. She shrank against him when Ford groaned there in the shadows.

"Easy, Miss Downing," Billy said. "That's Riley Ford. I crippled him with a bullet, and we'll have to build a small fire and see to his wound."

"But those Indians!" the girl gasped. "If they see a fire here, won't they return?"

"The Indians won't bother us any more," Billy said simply. "I killed their chief, and they'll go into mourning. Soon as Lieutenant Marple shows up in the mornin', we can go take charge of those Sioux without firin' a shot, most likely."

"We'll wait here for Tom and his men?" the girl asked, sharply.

"We'll wait here," Billy said quietly. "I'll be up on that ridge, yonder, and will have Jack Hill lookin' into the business end of my gun before the blasted renegade knows the game is up. Ford probably went to Lieutenant Marple and told him Jack Hill could lead him to Crippled Foot's camp."

"That kid lieutenant and them yellowlegs have been gettin' nosy down here," Riley Ford groaned. "Sure, I told him Crippled Foot was hidin' over here, and that Jack Hill would lead him to the camp. If you hadn't stuck yore blasted nose into this, Bates, we'd have got rid of that bunch of troopers, and shore made that meddlin' Colonel Downing sweat for what he done to us, too!"

"You're the cuss who'd better begin sweatin'," Billy growled. "Keep still, now, while I get a fire goin' and see about that wound. And I've got to look for Ott Tucker, too."

"Ott's head is blowed half off," Ford muttered. "Yuh yeller-eyed young hound, I'll likely wish I could swap places with Ott afore this is over!"

"You likely will," Billy droned. "Soon as Lieutenant Marple shows up, and we've put those Sioux war whoops over yonder in that camp under guard, I'm headin' back to Fort Fetterman. The lieutenant and his handful of men can handle those war whoops by keepin' 'em in camp. But they couldn't trail herd that murderin' bunch all the way back north, so I'll have to report to Colonel Downing and see that Lieutenant Marple has help gettin' his charges moved."

"And I'm going to Fort Fetterman with you, Billy!" the girl said quickly.

"Nothin' doin', girl!" Billy said sharply. "I'll have to travel fast, and you couldn't stand the pace."

"Couldn't I?" Wilma Downing asked quietly. "I believe you'll find that I can, Billy."

The tall scout muttered under his breath, but choked back the arguments he wanted to offer and began gathering kindling for a fire. Convincing Wilma Downing that she could not undertake the hard and dangerous trip to Fort Fetterman with him could be attended to later.

Billy Bates meant to get back to the fort as fast as his horse could take him. Bill Cody would no doubt have other assignments for him, and Billy wanted to be at those chores as quickly as he possibly could.

Treasure of the West

The Forty-niners, long ago,
The story's often told,
Made tracks across the weary miles
In quest of Western gold.

And some found treasure in the earth,
And some found wealth and fame—
While others lie forgotten now
In graves without a name.

Those days are done, and they who sought
Have put aside their charts—
But there's a treasure all may find,
The gold in Western hearts!

—Tex Mumford

PINTOS and

IT APPEARS we are in danger of losing the specific technical descriptive terms for our most gaudily colored horses of the West. A while back I attended a show of the Pinto Horse Breeders' Association. In their grand parade both pinto and paint horses were grouped under the same classification as "pinto" horses. I asked one of their officials if all these horses were down in the stud books as pintos, and was assured this was true. Morever, they were all pintos, he claimed.

I went and got me some literature of various pinto horse breeders associations, and discovered that they do classify them all as pintos.

Shades of the pioneer West! The long gone plains Indian warriors and their chiefs who rode to fame—in contemporary fiction at least—on their painted ponies may come up and take the war path again. The former movie heroes and villains who rode "calico" horses are challenged to go into the haunting business. Big Bill Hart and his smoking trusty six-guns are liable to come a-roaring into life any day.

Most of our horse lore and terms come from the Spanish and the old-time cow-

Carl W. Beck, Idaho Indian agent, on his calico paint

One of a series on Mounts that the Cowboys Rode!

PAINT HORSES

Pintos are speckled and paints are spotted — there's a difference, although not everybody can readily see it!

by GLADWELL RICHARDSON

boy of the West. So I went out to the ranch of my ancient friend, Sam Black. Sitting on a top rail I looked at his horses in the corral. In my "horse book" there were three pintos and two paints in the bunch. But I asked Sam how many pintos he had. "Three," he replied and I inquired what about those other two.

"Paints." He turned to give me a thoughtful appraisal before adding, "Yore eyes goin' bad on yuh, sonny?"

I showed him some of the literature of the pinto horse breeders. He promptly snorted. "Boy an' man I been ridin' hosses, breedin' hosses, an' sleepin' with hosses in Texas, New Mexico an' Arizony more than seventy years.

"Them two is paints!" He waved a rope gnarled bunch of fingers. "An' these, as any jackass can see, is pintos because they is speckled!" and that is the true definition of a pinto.

The Speckled Horse

Pinto comes from the Spanish word, *pinta*—Archaic Spanish, meaning a small spot—and is the speckled horse of the Western cowboy. Not the "spotted" horse, which is something else again. These "specks" vary from one-half inch in size to about two inches, and compose a fairly even pattern all over the main body coating.

If they are larger, then they become "spots" and open that particular horse into a whole host of possible classifications as to terms by body coloring. But strangely noticeable is the fact that when these "specks" are "spots", there is no set rule as to pattern. Some of these spots may be five inches long, while on the same horse others run all the way into feet, or cover as much as half the animal.

Shiek, champion tobiano stallion, winner of 65 blue ribbons, owned by C. W. Neill of Vista, Cal.

Too, a pinto may be of any basic color as long as the speckles are pretty well even over the body. Indeed, it is not rare to find one of three colors, though they are scarce. I remember as a kid that the second horse my Old Man gave me for my riding string was a strawberry-roan-pinto. The main body color was strawberry, with black markings, and there was a dark line down the back as well as silver white speckles.

Weighing about 800 pounds this pinto came from mustang strains, and was a "thunderbolt", being able to turn on a dime. It was inclined with deliberate mischievousness to pitch as soon as a rider hit the saddle, whether it was worn out or fresh caught. One morning he bucked throught a wire gate and then tossed me into a pile of sharp stones.

When I got up feeling of various knots and bruises my Old Man imparted this

sage advice, "One way to keep from getting stove up like that is to stay in the saddle."

The Pinto Has Stamina

I have seen pintos weighing slightly better than a thousand pounds, but most of them run from 750 to 900 pounds, ranging in height from eleven to thirteen hands. The pinto is a comparatively small horse yet a favored mount of cowboys because of its stamina. Beyond the point where heavier horses gave out, the pinto kept on going. And even "ridden to death" that head was always up there.

The pinto was more favored as a mount over the paint by the old time cowboy

Piebald horse—that is, black and white.

because he considered the latter an inferior horse. Usually, if a cowboy owned a paint, it was kept for short rides and "Sunday" occasions. The modern cowboy, however, has come to appreciate the paint horse better and is using it more than ever before.

That the pinto horse breeders make no distinction between these two types is to be deplored, but they are not to be censured. On the contrary, with the vanishing of the wild and semi-wild horses of the West, except for their efforts there would be a few of these colorful horses left. They are to be commended for preserving this horse, and for their work in raising its height and weight.

Towards this goal they have established definite standards of type, in two classifications. Their standards are those long desired such as refined, smooth head, medium lower lip and large nostrils. Muscled neck, close coupled body with straight back, massive chest, deep heart girth, a broad creased rump, filled and well muscled quarters. Their legs should have pasterns of medium length and slope, flat protruding leaders with little flesh, knee and hocks broad, flat and chiseled. In feet they want the flinty hoof of the Arab, small and oblong, correct stance with the hocks pointing slightly out. In height the pinto—and the paint, of course—should stand around 15.2 hands. Show horses range in height from 13.2 to 17 hands, and in weight from 1100 to 1400 pounds.

The two types which they are breeding are designated the Western Saddle Horse Pinto, and the American Parade Pinto—the first as a work horse for all useful purposes, and the latter as strictly a show horse.

Some painted ponies these! But they already have them, and the breeders of the West, especially in Southern California and the Salt River Valley of Arizona, have turned out magnificently colored horses so beautiful as to hurt your eyes.

However, the majority of these breeders use the word pinto to classify them all, then break the breed into divisions they call "Appaloosa," *"tobiano"* and *"overo."* The Appaloosa is an entirely different horse. And to *tobiano* and *overo* should be added feather, and calico paints.

Tobiano and *overo* are terms for color and patterns deriving from Spanish times through the cowboy of the Southwest. Feather paint is strictly the American cowboy's own. Where the border made by two colors coming together is not separate and distinct, it is said to be "dusted," "laced," "sprinkled" or "feathered" in. Hence the name for this type of paint horse. However, this does not apply to a *tobiano,* it seems.

Half White, Half Black

Tobiano is definitely a black and white paint horse. As in all paints there is no rule as to where these colors may be located; on the shoulders, hips, belly, back, or head, just so long as they are in

existence. The more pleasing the natural arrangement of the pattern, the more valuable the paint horse is considered. Some patches may be separate and distinct, while the color may rove and wind around any way. Just so long as the paint is colored half white and half black, he is a *tobiano.*

The term *overo,* originally used by the vaquero of the Southwest and Mexico meant an egg colored horse. The Texas cowboy changed it to mean a paint horse with light color, extending up from the belly and lower regions, to a darker color, or colors, spreading down from the back. In this case we have the egg-white meeting a darker color—any except black—from the top portion of the horse. Up close the *overo's* white looks muddy, or washed, but looks white from a distance.

The movies popularized the paint horse as a "calico". Indeed, they mistakenly applied the term to all paints. Any paint horse of three colors is a calico. Also when the darker coating is liver chestnut, or any of the other Ysabella bright satiny colors, a horse is called a calico paint.

How the Colors Run

The colors of paint horses seem to run something in this order of percentages, black, sorrel, bay, roan, brown, buckskin and blue. The *tobiano,* or black paint predominates. Next come the *overos* in the light sorrels and buckskins. The bays, roans, browns and dark sorrels would most likely be calicos, and just plain paint horses. The blue, which the Texas and Arizona cowboy would call a *"moro-paint",* the rarest on the list of probable color combinations.

The color, or colors of the head of a paint horse seem to have direct bearing on the color of the eyes. Any of the lighter colors striped across, or ringing one eye are likely to go with pink, china, white, grayish-blue, or chalky eyes. It was because of these eyes the cowboy considered the paint an unstable, weak animal and likely to go blind.

On the other hand some paints, and especially those of darker color, have black, brown or even blue eyes—one or both—and some are glass eyed; the *zarcos* of the vaquero. These darker-eyed horses were considered to be normal and were those most sought after when the cowboy wanted a "show horse".

It is the paint horse rather than the pinto that is seen most often on dude ranches, or in rodeo and celebration parades of the West. And like old Sam Black, when the cowboy mentions a pinto he means a horse of basic color that is speckled.

In turn the cowboy in speaking of a paint horse specifically identifies the animal by one of cattlelands accepted terms; *tobiano, overo,* feather or calico. These four names always apply. However, as is true in all our western nomenclature there may be locally adopted additional names, or a paint horse owners own pet name, which in time may come to refer to any similar such animal. Sam Black once owned an *overo* he called, "red chicken *overo",* because, he said, the darker color of the *overo* looked almost like the color of the eggs his Rhode Island reds laid.

In the same way a blue paint in Wyoming becomes along the Mexican Border a *"moro"* paint. *Moro* is the Mexican vaquero's name for a blue horse.

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WANTED MEN Move Fast

When a knavish trio of the dim trails attempts to buck a swindler's stacked deck, the hangman holds stakes and a dead man is the fateful trump card!

a Deacon Ross novelet by

CHAPTER I

Buck Picks a Fight

DEACON ROSS gathered in his two companions with an all-encompassing flicker of his dark eyes and laid a long, tapering index finger to his lips.

"Shhhh!" he whispered. "Listen!"

The three bad men had been in Agua Dulce, trading center for the half dozen cattle spreads of Sweetwater Valley, just long enough to tie up outside the Blue Chip Saloon and come in and order a drink. Being wanted men, they had naturally chosen to sit at a table next to a wall, where nobody could surprise them from the rear. And now words were coming through the wall at the Deacon's back.

They were not expecting trouble, but their continued existence demanded constant preparedness. To men with a total of twenty-four thousand dollars in reward money hanging over their heads, every stranger is a potential enemy. The trio had been riding almost a week and were far from their familiar stamping grounds along the Border. But in the course of years reward notices bearing their likenesses had traveled far, too.

None of the trio was a figure, who once seen, would likely be forgotten. Deacon Ross was tall and long-fingered; black garbed from head to foot, with immaculate

Kenneth exhibited the reward notices to the badmen

white linen and a pearl-handled six-gun in a shoulder holster under his left armpit.

Pud Eiler was six-foot-four, and weighed two hundred seventy pounds without carrying a useless ounce of fat. He had a square, placid face belying the threat of his crossed cartridge belts and tied-down pistols.

Buck Fleming worked with a medium sized carcass and toted one well-oiled six-gun. It was marked by an unforgettable thatch of flaming red hair.

It was no wonder that, wherever they went, those three cautiously scanned faces for that gleam of recognition which would send them on a dash for liberty, shoulder to shoulder and all guns blazing.

AT the Deacon's whispered order, Buck Fleming shifted his chair slightly, pressing an ear closer to the wooden wall. The voice coming through the wall from the private back room of the saloon was harsh but roughly persuasive.

"Listen, kid," the voice said. "When are you goin' to wake up and get wise to yourself? You're sweet on Emily. That sticks out a mile. And she sort of likes you, too. But old Tilghman treats her like a daughter and aims to leave her the Tumbling T and everything else he owns. She'll be rich."

"To hell with that!" another voice answered angrily. "I don't want her for her money!"

"Who said you did, Joe?" the first voice said. "But you ought to know that old Tilghman won't stand back and watch her marry up with a penniless thirty-a-month cowpoke.

"Now it might be different if you had a few thousand dollars saved up and a spread of your own picked out for your bride's home. But you'll never save up that stake out of thirty a month. What you need, Joe, is some quick money. Easy money, and lots of it.

"I'm the man to show you how to get it. You don't want to be too squeamish, kid. How do yuh reckon these oldtimers with their big spreads got their start if it wa'n't with a long loop and a hot iron?"

There was a long pause, followed by a faint, good-natured back-slapping sound.

"Think it over, Joe," the voice went on. "You go fill that grocery order and pile the stuff on the buckboard. We'll talk about this some more on the way back to the spread."

There was the sound of scraping chairs. Then a door up near the bar opened and a young man backed out, shaping a worn sombrero onto his tousled yellow head. As he pushed through the swinging doors to the street, his lean jaw was set and his wide-set gray eyes were puzzled and unhappy.

The other man came out of the back room and stood waiting at the bar until the bartender set out a special bottle and glass. He was broad and chunky and middle-aged, with tufted sun-bleached brows, pale eyes and a leathery face which was reddened by weather and lined by years of tough living.

"Any man," Buck Fleming muttered, "who will play on a man's love for a woman to get him to go wrong, is second cousin to a skunk!"

Fleming got up, downed the rest of his drink and carried the empty glass toward the bar. There was plenty of space at the bar, but Fleming deliberately shoved the chunky man aside, then seized him by a shoulder and sent him pinning backward.

"Who the hell do yuh think you're shovin'?" Buck snarled, dropping his empty glass and falling into a crouch, his spread fingers dangling close to the butt of his holstered iron. The Deacon and Pud Eiler came silently to their feet.

Startled by the abruptness of the attack, the stocky man came to a stop with his back against the wall, all of the color gone from his normally ruddy cheeks. Facing him, Buck was turned slightly away from the bar. The bartender took the special bottle by the neck and lifted it like a club. At the same time one of the men along the bar, a scar-faced fellow with the mark of the gunman on him, reached stealthily for his gun.

The Deacon said, "Don't, friend!" in a tone which turned every eye in the saloon in his direction. With a motion indescribably swift and graceful, Pud Eiler dropped his big hands to his sides and swept them up again filled with guns. The scar-faced gunman's eyes popped wide, and his half drawn gun slid back into its sheath. The fat bartender reached for the nearest glass and ostentatiously filled it from the special bottle.

"We will keep this," the Deacon said

quietly, "strictly man to man." He nodded toward the chunky man whom Buck had shoved. "Go ahead, mister. Make your play. We won't pitch in unless these others do."

COLOR had come back into the chunky man's cheeks, and he was watching the three badmen with narrowed eyes. He shook his head slowly.

"I think I could down you, hombre," he said to Buck in a level voice which showed neither anger nor fear. "But I've got other ideas."

He stepped calmly up to the bar and took the special bottle from the bartender.

"Bring four glasses," he ordered. Then he moved toward the private room and summoned the trio with a jerk of his head.

"Come in here," he commanded. "All three of you. I want to talk with you."

"And who," Buck growled truculently, "might you be? Who were you orderin' around last year at this time?"

Buck knew, when the Deacon calmly followed the man into the private room, that there was some good reason behind his prompt acquiescence, but he hated even the appearance of giving in.

The stocky man reversed a chair and sat down straddling its back. The Deacon and Buck took chairs on the other side of the table. Pud Eiler moved placidly over to a corner and stood with his eyes on the door through which they had come.

"The name is Landon," the stocky man said. "Gus Landon, foreman of Peter Tilghman's Tumbling T spread. And who are you?"

"Smith, Jones, and Brown," Buck replied promptly. "Or make it Gonzales, Martinez, and Perez if you like that better."

Gus Landon grinned. "Thought so," he said, pouring a generous slug into a glass and pushing the bottle across the table. "I never saw you three before, but a few years on the owlhoot puts its brand on a man. You're on the dodge, you're all three plenty handy with your guns, and you're as ready as the next man to pick up some easy money if the proposition sounds good to you. Am I right?"

Buck showed signs of flaring up again, but the Deacon cut in ahead of him.

"We would hardly care to give you a signed statement to that effect," he drawled, "but just to keep the conversation going we admit tentatively that we came to your fair city to turn a dishonest dollar. What is your proposition?"

Gus Landon's pale eyes widened with satisfaction. "Good!" he exclaimed. "Then we can get down to business. How does a hundred dollars apiece for two nights' work sound to you?"

Over in the corner, Pud Eiler let out an unintelligible snort.

"Chicken feed!" Buck Fleming exclaimed.

"It would depend," the Deacon stated, "on the kind of work."

"All right," Landon said, "call it a hundred and fifty apiece. It's a rustling job, a big one, with a big slice of steers from every spread in Sweetwater Valley. We've been altering brands up in the hills, and are about ready to roll. We've got all the cowboys we need, but we're short on fighters. With you three added to those we've got, we can fight our way through, in case the local ranchers spot the hideout and give us any trouble.

"If they don't spot us, you'll get your pay just for goin' along on the ride. Once we're out of this valley it'll be clear sailin'. Once we cross the state line there'll be men on the other side with cash on the barrelhead, ready to take over."

"Steers from every spread in Sweetwater Valley," the Deacon repeated. "Does that include the Tumbling T?"

Gus Landon grinned evilly. "Sure! Old man Tilghman is sick abed with one foot in his grave. I've got a free hand out there."

The Deacon nodded. "I reckon," he said slowly, "we can call it a deal."

Gus Landon came to his feet. "Good! Now I've got to get back to the Tumbling T. We came in for provisions and the buckboard ought to be loaded by now. You men come along about dusk. Ask anybody directions to the Tumbling T. Then wait for me in a grove of willows where the trail dips down to ford a stream. I'll join yuh there and take yuh out to the hideout."

LANDON swaggered from the room. The Deacon waited until he heard Gus Landon leave the saloon. Then he led the trio silently through the barroom and out to their horses.

They rode a quarter mile beyond the edge of town before he spoke. "What's bothering you, Pud?" he inquired, noting his pard's strained expression.

"Well, Deacon," Pud said. "Didn't we come here to rob a bank? What's the idea of us mixin' into a rustling deal?"

The Deacon spat eloquently into the dust of the road. "Buck, here," he said, "was all for picking a fight with this Landon for trying to lead young Joe astray. But I thought it might be interesting to find out just what sort of crookedness he wanted to lead him into. Now we know. Tilghman, Landon's employer, is a sick man, and Landon is robbing the spread which was entrusted to his care. A pretty picture, Sweetwater Valley. If this is a sample of what goes on here, it should be called Stinking Water instead."

Buck Fleming, who had regained all of his customary good nature, laughed suddenly.

"Besides, Pud," the Deacon drawled, "you're forgettin' Emily."

"Emily?" Pud repeated. "Emily who?"

"Just Emily," Buck cut in. "The girl Joe is in love with. Old Tilghman is leavin' her everything he owns, and he's got one foot in the grave. That means by robbing the Tumbling T, Landon is practically stealing straight from her."

"Oh!" Pud Eiler exclaimed, lifting his twin guns up and down in their holsters. "He is, is he? Then what are we waitin' for?"

"Dusk, Pud," Buck answered. "Just dusk, that's all."

CHAPTER II

Puzzle for Badmen

POINTING ahead through the deepening dusk, Buck said, "I reckon those are the willows."

Leaving Agua Dulce shortly after sundown, the three badmen had been riding for half an hour, following a well defined wagon trail leading out across a grassy range dotted with whiteface cattle. The trail was dipping gently downward now toward the bank of a stream, flanked on either side by a dense willow thicket.

As Buck spoke, Gus Landon rode out of the willows onto the trail and reined in, waiting.

"Perhaps," the Deacon said, "we had better spread out."

"What for?" Pud Eiler demanded. "He's only one man, ain't he?"

The Deacon shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. Friend Landon knows we are wanted men. If, in the four hours since we last saw him, it has occurred to him to find out just how badly we are wanted, he may have decided it's more profitable to lay a trap for us than to hire our guns."

Pud brightened at the prospect and rode more alertly in his saddle. The big gunman was never happier than when shooting his way out of a tight spot.

"But if he did take us and turn us in," Pud objected, "we could spill the fact that he's behind this big rustling deal. He wouldn't dare—"

"I doubt," the Deacon answered dryly, "if we would be in any shape to do any talking. All of our reward notices read *Alive or Dead.*"

The trio spread out and still a good gunshot away from the willows, reined to a halt.

"Come on!" Gus Landon called impatiently.

They made no answer and presently the stocky ranch foreman rode forward.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Ain't you comin'?"

As if by prearranged signal, Buck and Pud closed in on either side of him, the Deacon remaining behind.

"Yes," the Deacon answered, "we are coming. Lead the way, friend. I will be right behind you."

Gus Landon snorted. "Suspicious bunch of buzzards, ain't you?"

Buck Fleming laughed. "I knew a feller once," he said in a reminiscent tone, "who started to ford a stream just like this one. Owlhoot hombre, he was, and a wizard with his guns. But he never reached the other side. Trouble was, he didn't have an eye in the back of his head."

Gus Landon wheeled his horse about. "Come on," he ordered gruffly. "You'll find no ambush here. When I make a deal with a man, I play it straight."

"Like the deal," the Deacon said softly, "to manage the ranch and protect the cattle of a sick old man?"

They rode through the ford, the three badmen closely surrounding the ranch foreman, then lined out across the range at a swift trot with Gus Landon leading the way. After a while Buck Fleming dropped back to ride with the Deacon.

"I'm afraid," the Deacon said in a low voice, "that we may have put ideas into friend Landon's head. Perhaps we should have chanced the ford."

A full moon rose above the distant eastern mountains, and the pair lapsed into silence, busy picking out landmarks and fixing them in their trail-wise memories. An hour passed, and the trail rose sharply and wound among wooded foothills. A chill night breeze drifted down from the higher mountains beyond. Presently Gus Landon pulled rein before a dense growth of cedar and mountain pine at the entrance to a canyon.

"Guard ahead," he explained, and sent a hail forward which was answered by a gruff challenge and the metallic click of a cocking rifle.

"It's me, Gus Landon!" the ranch foreman answered, and rode slowly forward.

A GUARD stepped out into the moonlight from the black darkness beneath the trees, peered up into Landon's face, and stepped back, satisfied.

They rode on through a narrow canyon and out into a valley beyond. Lights gleamed from a ramshackle old building that looked like an abandoned ranch house. Out in the center of the narrow mountain valley, moonlight revealed the dim shapes of cattle moving restlessly around the edges of a large herd. Gus Landon rode up to the lighted ranch house and dismounted.

"Wait here," he commanded, and went up onto the porch past a handful of slouching men and into the house.

The three badmen dismounted and bunched together by their horses. Through a lighted window they saw a portly, graying man in a dark business suit seated behind a plain wooden table. Gus Landon came into view, talked for a few moments with this man, then turned and came back onto the porch.

"Come on in," he said.

They followed him through a rickety doorway and in to the room where the man sat.

"Here they are, boss," Landon said.

The man looked silently from one to the other with sharp, beady eyes set in puffy flesh which gave him a permanent squint. Sizing him up in turn, the Deacon noted that the man's suit was well cut and expensive, and that the sagging jowls disguised a strong jaw which bespoke power and self-centered determination. He noted, too, that Gus Landon, in spite of an exaggerated pose of confidence, was afraid of the man. He was clearly waiting uneasily for his approval and he quailed when the man finally turned toward him with disapproval in his beady eyes.

"You damned fool!" the man rasped in a throaty voice. "You complete damned fool!"

"What's the matter, boss?" Gus Landon asked quickly. "What's wrong?"

The man stood up, his rounded paunch resting against the table.

"You stupid fool!" he said to Landon, waving a fat hand in the direction of Pud Eiler. "I've had you on the lookout for over a month for someone who could answer to his general description and when you find him you don't even realize it! I suppose if we hadn't needed gunhands you'd have passed him up entirely!"

He pointed a fat finger at Pud. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Fulano, Mengano, and Cualquier," Pud snapped.

The fat man remained silent for a long moment. When he spoke again, his tone was oily and ingratiating.

"When there is profit for everybody, there is no reason for quarreling. You men hired out your guns for a hundred and fifty dollars apiece. You two"—he pointed at the Deacon and Buck—"can keep the jobs you were hired for. As for you, Big Fellow, I have a better job in mind. What do you say to five thousand dollars for less than a month of work? Come to the bank in Agua Dulce tomorrow morning at six and I'll explain it to you. I'll leave the rear door unlocked for you."

Pud Eiler glanced toward the Deacon, received a faint nod, and said: "We'll be there."

"No. Just you. These other two—"

The Deacon spoke for the first time

since they had entered the room.

"It's three or none," he said quietly. "We work together."

The fat man stared at the Deacon's long, saturnine face as though sizing him up all over again. Then he nodded grudgingly.

"Very well," he said, his little eyes sheathed and thoughtful, "if you insist." Then as though thinking aloud: "I suppose in twelve years Tad can be expected to have made some friends. It is natural that he might bring two of them along with him."

He came out from behind the table and moved toward the door.

"Tomorrow morning at six, then," he repeated, and walked out.

CHAPTER III

The Missing Heir

THE SIGN on the door of the private, glassed-in office up near the front of the bank read, *John Kennicott, President* and the man seated at the big desk when the Deacon pushed the door open was the fat man who had made them the proposition the night before.

So quietly had the three badmen entered the bank through the unlocked rear door that Banker Kennicott had no warning of their presence until they stepped into his office. He started suddenly, came half way out of his chair, and dropped his hand into an open desk drawer. Then he exhaled loudly and settled down again.

"Oh, it's you," he said with evident relief.

The Deacon smiled. "You had some sort of proposition?"

At mention of business the banker completely regained his composure. He nodded toward chairs and waited until the three sat down.

"Briefly," he said, "this is the story. Old Peter Tilghman owns the biggest cattle ranch in Sweetwater Valley, the Tumbling T. Twelve years ago his son Thaddeus ran away from home and never came back, leaving his father alone on the ranch. Peter Tilghman carried on alone for years, but as he grew old and his health began to fail, he grew lonesome and started a search for distant relatives. Too, as his banker, he commissioned me to find his missing son."

"Who is Emily?" the Deacon cut in. "A relative?"

The banker's little eyes narrowed with a look of hate and greed.

"An adventuress!" he said. "A scheming adventuress! She is a very distant relative whom Tilghman located and invited to visit him. Recognizing a good thing when she saw it, she stayed on to nurse him, and now she has him wrapped around her little finger. Tilghman will leave her everything he owns unless—"

The Deacon nodded. "Unless," he supplied, "you show up opportunely with the missing son and heir."

Banker Kennicott smiled slowly, and when he spoke again his tone was suave and oily.

"I am glad to see that you are a man of intelligence. I hate to work with fools. Peter Tilghman is a big man. Six feet two and well over two hundred pounds. Twelve years ago, when he ran away from home, Tad Tilghman was only fifteen years old but already six feet tall. It was clear that he would grow to be a bigger man than his father. I figure that at the age of twenty-seven Tad would have been just about the size of this man here."

"Would have been?" the Deacon repeated.

The banker snorted. "Do you take me for a fool? Tad Tilghman died in a saloon brawl in Juarez five years ago. I found that out soon after starting my search for him."

The Deacon nodded gravely. "Then there is no chance of the real heir showing up, and you want Pud, here, to pose as the missing son. Lord, man, do you realize what a gamble it is? There must have been a hundred little childhood incidents which the father will expect him to remember—things that happened, or little personal boyish phrases which only the two would know."

"Don't worry," the banker said shortly. "I know them all. I've been out to his spread on business dozens of times; and the old fool talks about nothing else. It's enough to make a man sick at his stomach.

I know every bright remark the kid made since he was old enough to talk, and every incident. Here, take this."

He shoved a paper across the desk at Pud. "You memorize what's on here and you'll have enough. If he mentions anything else, you can either fake it or pretend to have forgotten. It will be easy, I tell you. Old Tilghman is so anxious to have his son back that anybody I sent would be accepted without question. He will close his own mind to any doubts, because he will want to believe in you."

He pushed another paper across the desk. "Here's a letter to Tilghman telling him that I have investigated thoroughly and am convinced that you are his son. Take that along with you."

He rose as though the interview were ended, but the Deacon remained seated.

"You mentioned one month's work," he said. "Why just a month?"

BANKER Kennicott shrugged his fat shoulders. "Old Tilghman is dying," he stated callously. "You will inherit in less than a month. Then you will sign papers selling the ranch to me, and I will hand you five thousand dollars in cash.

"After that"—he paused, and turned hard little eyes on each of the trio in turn —"you will move on. Let us have no mistake about that. You try to double-cross me, and you will never live to profit by it. Now you'd better get started. And remember, while you are at the Tumbling T you take your orders from Gus Landon."

The Deacon rose and started for the door and the others followed. They went out the back way, mounted their horses and started for the second time along the wagon trail to the Tumbling T.

The two rode in silence, each one occupied with a mental image of a lonely, sick old man, hoping for the return of his son.

Coming finally into sight of the Tumbling T ranch buildings, the three bad men looked at a layout which was both big and well kept. There was a large, solidly built two-story ranch house, a bunkhouse that would accommodate better than twenty men; a sizable barn, and a scattering of smaller outbuildings, including a smithy, a tool shed, and various other storage buildings. Out at the rear, the big windmill which hoisted water into an overhead storage tank was in good repair and well oiled.

A much worn, but serviceable one-horse chaise stood in front of the ranch house, and as they watched, a man with the unmistakable mark of a doctor about him, came out of the house carrying a black bag. He was followed by a young woman who stood beside the chaise and looked up at the doctor with a worried crease between her dark brown eyes.

She was lithe and well built, scarcely more than twenty years old and even from that distance, deliberately pretty. She talked with the doctor for a moment, then went quickly back into the ranch house. The doctor popped his buggy whip and the horse started out at a fast trot, presently speeding by the trio in a cloud of dust.

"That dirty lyin' low-down son of a coyote!" Pud growled.

"Who?" Buck Fleming demanded. "Who do you mean, Pud?"

The big gunman turned a broad face which was flushed with anger.

"Why, that lyin' banker!" he exclaimed. "Callin' her a scheming female! I've a notion to go back and twist his ugly neck for him!"

Buck's sudden laugh rang out loud and joyous. "Get that, Deacon?" he chuckled. "Pud casts one vote for Emily's innocence. She happens to be pretty!"

The Deacon tossed an amused sidelong glance at Pud, but remained silent. Then all amusement left his face as Gus Landon came out of the bunk house and walked forward to meet them. The trio rode up close to the ranch house and dismounted.

"So you decided to take the job," Gus Landon said in a low voice, glancing toward the house as he spoke.

Pud grinned at him. "Meet Thaddeus Tilghman," he said. "Tad for short. The long lost heir, and soon to be your new boss."

Gus Landon stiffened. "Let's not have any of that," he growled. "While you're on the Tumbling T you take your orders from me, and don't you forget it!"

"Kind of uppity for a hired man, ain't you, my man?" Pud taunted. "Step aside for the new heir and his two bosom friends!"

With evident relish he shouldered the burly foreman aside and ran up the steps to throw open the front door.

"Don't bother to come in," he said in a louder voice. "We'll introduce ourselves. You said her name was Emily? A cousin, maybe?"

The good looking girl who had talked with the doctor appeared in front of him just inside the door.

"I am Emily Black," she said, her voice lifting on a note of inquiry.

Pud swept off his hat and stepped inside, moving aside for Buck and the Deacon to follow him. Then he closed the door and turned to the girl with a broad smile.

"Guess who!" he exclaimed.

From his position in the rear of the trio, the Deacon watched her with narrowed eyes. At first she looked from one to another of them uncomprehendingly. Then, as her gaze took in Pud's towering height and vast bulk, a sudden change came over her. Her well formed lips parted, and her hands came up to clasp in front of her breasts. Her brown eyes widened with a look of hope.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh! Can it be—Tad? Oh, this will do Uncle Peter more good than all the medicines in the world!"

KNOWING that Pud was always speechless in the presence of feminine beauty, the Deacon stepped forward.

"Yes," he said, "the son and heir has returned."

He stressed the word *heir*, watching her closely, but detected no adverse reaction to the implied suggestion that she was no longer in line to inherit the Tumbling T. Her face was a mirror of happiness.

"Uncle Peter," the Deacon repeated. "Then you are Mr. Tilghman's niece?"

Still smiling, the girl shook her head. "No. He likes me to call him that, but I am only a very distant cousin. A few months ago he wrote and asked me to visit him. I was teaching school on an Indian Reservation in Arizona. I came during a vacation period. Then Uncle Peter became ill, so—" she made a little explanatory gesture with both hands—"I stayed on because he needed me."

"Mr. Tilghman is not well?" the Deacon inquired.

A look of worry clouded her face. "Indigestion," she said. "And in spite of everything Dr. Mason does it seems to be getting worse. He has cramps and nausea and can't eat anything except oatmeal mush or thin soups. Gus Landon, the ranch foreman, whom you met as you came in, cooks everything for him personally."

"Oh, he does, does he?" Buck Fleming exclaimed, from a position on a leather covered couch over near a window. "What makes that big ape think he can cook?"

She started, and looked over at him reprovingly. "Mr. Landon has been most considerate and thoughtful," she stated, just a touch of the schoolteacher in her tone. Then a big moon-faced antique clock struck ten; and she glanced doubtfully toward a closed door at one end of the room.

"Dr. Mason gave Uncle Peter something to quiet him and said not to disturb him for an hour. But I'm sure if I were to tell him about Tad—"

She was moving toward the closed door. The Deacon followed swiftly and laid a hand on her arm.

"No, child. Let us go in without any announcement."

Then hurried footsteps sounded from the rear of the house and the young man named Joe whom they had seen in the Blue Chip Saloon burst excitedly into the room.

"Emily!" he exclaimed. "What's this I hear about—"

Summoning his two companions with a jerk of his head, the Deacon opened the door of the sick room and the three bad men filed in, closing the door behind them.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Sick Old Man

ALL the shades in the downstairs bedroom were drawn and the big man, propped up by pillows in the large four-poster bed, lay in the subdued light which filtered in around their edges. He seemed to be half asleep, as though under the influence of a sedative. As the man's wild-set gray eyes opened wider, the Deacon stepped quickly forward, blocking his view of the other two.

"Before you read this, Mr. Tilghman," he said, holding out the banker's letter, "I want to tell you that this big fellow standing behind me is not your son, and that what this letter says is a lie."

The big rancher grunted and lifted himself higher on his pillows.

"Eh?" he said. "What's that?" He shook his gray head impatiently as though to clear his brain and blinked rapidly. The Deacon waited until the rancher met his eyes.

"I size you up," he said quietly, "as a man who can take his bad news in a single dose. Your son is dead. That fact has been established beyond any doubt. You must understand that there is absolutely no hope remaining that he is alive."

The rancher closed his eyes, and the lines on his leathery old face deepened. Then he opened them again and looked squarely at the Deacon.

"I can take it," he rumbled. "It was the uncertainty that hurt worst."

The Deacon nodded understandingly.

"So you can go right ahead an' leave everything to Emily," Pud chimed in happily from his position over by the door.

Buck Fleming's sudden laugh sounded loud in the sick room. "Don't mind him, Mr. Tilghman. Pud falls for every pretty face. It don't mean a thing."

The pair stepped forward as Peter Tilghman sat straight up in the bed.

"What the devil is all this about?" he demanded.

The Deacon shoved the letter into his hand and raised a curtain to let in more light.

"Read this," he commanded. "Then we'll have a council of war."

He drew up a chair and sat down. When the rancher was through reading, he explained the situation rapidly.

"You've got to pretend that you have been completely taken in and have accepted Pud as your son," he concluded. "That way, we can—"

Old Peter Tilghman let out a roar and leaped from the bed with surprising agility.

"Like heck I will!" he bellowed. "Give me my clothes! Give me my guns! I'll show those two-faced, double-crossing—"

Pud Eiler moved silently forward and placed his broad chest against that of the older man. Pud was two inches taller, but they had the same broadness of shoulder and heavy build. Pud shook his head slowly.

"The Deacon," he stated, "calls the turns. You wouldn't want your new found son to have to slap you down, would you, poppa?"

The big rancher glared angrily for a moment, then suddenly grinned. He climbed back into bed.

"Go ahead," he rumbled. "After all, you named the game. If you hadn't told the truth, I think this big fellow here might have fooled me."

He groaned suddenly and crossed his arms tightly over his stomach and leaned over.

"Cramps!" he muttered through clenched teeth, and sweat broke out on his face. "They seems to get worse every day!"

The attack seemed to be acute; but it did not last long. In another minute Peter Tilghman heaved a sigh of relief, mopped his brow with a handkerchief, and lay slackly back on his pillows.

THE door opened and Gus Landon came in carrying a tray on which was a bowl of oatmeal, a spoon, and a glass of water.

"Time for your second meal," he announced, placing the tray on the rancher's lap.

Peter Tilghman looked at it with disgust. "They feed me this slop four times a day," he grumbled.

Buck Fleming inserted himself between the rancher and the foreman.

"That's all, my man," he said. "Be off. We're in conference."

Gus Landon glared in helpless silence. Buck grinned and pointed to the door, and after a moment of hesitation Landon went out. When the door had closed behind him, the Deacon lifted the tray from Peter Tilghman's lap.

"Don't eat that," he said. "Don't even drink the water. I had a hunch when Kennicott made his proposition, that he was a shade too certain that you would be in your grave in less than a month. It looks as though he may be doing something to push you over the edge. I don't like the look of those *cramps*."

Peter Tilghman turned gray and clasped both hands tightly over his stomach. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Poison?"

The Deacon smiled reassuringly. "If it's what I think it is," he said, "it will wear off if you avoid taking any more of it. Does your foreman eat with the family or with the hands?"

"With the family," the rancher answered. "Why?"

"It will be noon in less than an hour," the Deacon said. "Why don't you get dressed and eat a regular meal? I've got things I want you to do."

Peter Tilghman turned sideways and swung his bare feet down to the floor.

"Food!" he exclaimed. "Real food! You don't think it will hurt me?" He got up and moved over to a closet and began getting out his clothes.

The Deacon shook his head. "Unless I am mistaken," he said, "there is nothing wrong with you except that you can't digest arsenic. They have been giving you small doses. Just enough to cause cramps and nausea. After the idea had been well established that you were a very sick man and likely to die, they'd have given you a killing dose and everyone would believe that you died a natural death.

"Kennicott is the brain behind this plot. He's clever and dangerous and utterly ruthless. We've got to lay our plans carefully or he'll slip through our fingers in the end."

"But he talked in front of all three of you, didn't he?" the rancher protested. "With your testimony—"

For the second time the Deacon's long, saturnine face was softened by a smile.

"There are twenty-four thousand reasons why we couldn't stay and testify against him, and Kennicott knows that," he stated dryly. "Wanted men must act fast and get away fast."

"Wanted men?" Peter Tilghman echoed, staring at the three bad men in blank astonishment. "You're wanted men? And yet you are doing all this for me instead of—"

Gratitude always made the Deacon uncomfortable. "Now listen carefully," he said, talking in a low voice, outlining his plan while Tilghman dressed. . . .

In view of the fact that Peter Tilghman had always been a pretty outspoken hombre and had never indulged in play-acting, he did a commendable job of covering up his hatred for Gus Landon during the noon meal.

Immediately afterward, following instructions from the Deacon, he handed Landon a check for six months' advance wages.

"With Tad back home to run things, Landon," Tilghman explained, "and with his friend Buck to be his *segundo*, we don't have room for you on the Tumbling T. Here's six months' advance pay. Before you use it all up, you're sure to find another job as good as the one you're leavin'."

GUS LANDON'S chunky body jerked as though hit by a fist and the color drained slowly from his florid face.

"The Tumbling T will miss you, hombre," Tilghman stated gravely. "But your loss will be my gain. And Tad's—especially Tad's."

Gus Landon swallowed once with difficulty, and mumbled some unintelligible words of thanks for the check and went out to the bunkhouse to pack his warbag. They saw him presently, riding toward town, leading the second of his two private horses behind him. The Deacon followed Peter Tilghman back into the bedroom.

"Not knowing what we may do," the Deacon said, "Gus Landon will start that rustled herd moving out of the valley tonight. Now you can send to the other ranchers to come to the Tumbling T at dusk and bring their men. But first I have one other thing to do."

He went out to the bunkhouse, found the yellow haired young man named Joe, and led him out into the open where they could talk without being overheard.

"The big fellow is not Tad Tilghman," he stated baldly. "This is just a fake put up to keep Tilghman's mind off the rustling. After we pull out, Emily will be in line to inherit. This is your last chance to make that pile of dough that Landon was talking about. Better get your horse and ride it to town and tell Landon you'll throw in with him in the rustling. Be wise, kid. You know old Tilghman will never allow you to marry Emily unless you've got a stake saved up."

He turned and walked back to the house without giving the young man any chance to reply. Once inside, he watched him from the shelter of the draperies in a front window. The Deacon saw him circle

the bunk house, then dash across the open space toward the rear of the house at a dead run.

With a nod of satisfaction the Deacon went back into the bedroom. He was seated in a corner out of sight from the door when young Joe burst in.

"Mr. Tilghman!" Joe exclaimed. "I've got some mighty bad news for you. Mighty bad. You've been fooled. This big guy that says he is your son—"

The Deacon spoke up from his position in the corner. "Mr. Tilghman," he said dryly, "already knows that Tad is a fake, Joe."

He got up and laid an arm across the young man's shoulders. "Nice going, Joe! I doubt if you will ever again even toy with the idea of being dishonest. And if Tilghman has half the sense I give him credit for, when you finally screw up your courage to propose to Emily, I think he will agree to the match."

The door burst open and Buck Fleming came striding in. "Deacon!" he exclaimed. "I've been watchin' the trail like you said. That fat slob of a banker will get here in about ten minutes. I saw him ride around the bend below that flat-topped mesa over beyond the ford."

The Deacon smiled, and seeing the gleam of anticipation in those dark eyes, Tilghman was able to take the full measure of the man.

"No doubt," the Deacon drawled, "he is coming to congratulate Mr. Tilghman on the return of his son. But I have the feeling that he will also be anxious to talk to you and Pud and me in private. Perhaps we had better ride out to meet him and give him that opportunity."

He moved out through the door, Buck following close behind him.

TEXAS
TRIGGER CHAMP

The True Story of Adolph Topperwein, Crack Marksman

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

CHAPTER FIVE

Sweetwater Showdown

"WE thought, Mr. Kennicott," the Deacon said, making his tone of voice s e r v i l e and fawning, "that y o u might want to talk to the three of us in private. So when we saw y o u coming, Pud—Tad, I mean, we must remember to call him Tad—made the excuse of looking over the spread and we rode out here to wait for you."

Buck glanced sharply at the Deacon, afraid that he might be overdoing his part, but the Deacon had sized up his man correctly. Banker Kennicott was the sort to absorb any amount of flattery and subservience, and he was now swallowing the bait hook, line, and sinker. The original anger was fading from his fat face, to be replaced by surprise and dawning satisfaction.

The four men were reined in about a quarter mile from the ranch house and hidden from the buildings by a thicket of mesquite brush. Banker Kennicott regarded the three badmen doubtfully.

"Gus Landon," he said, "had the idea that you persuaded old Tilghman to fire him."

"Heavens, no, Mr. Kennicott!" the Deason exclaimed in a shocked tone. "Why on earth should we do that?"

"He thought," the banker said, somewhat mollified, but still suspicious, "that you might have some fool notion that you could double-cross me and hang onto the spread."

"Surely, Mr. Kennicott," the Deacon exclaimed in vast surprise, "you didn't think that we would be so foolish!"

"Well, you'd better not!" the banker growled. He drew some papers from a pocket and unfolded them, revealing three reward notices bearing poor but recognizable likenesses of the trio. He laid them over a knee and smoothed out the creases with a fat palm.

"The sheriff," he said, "doesn't know that these were among his collection of

old reward notices, and he doesn't know that I lifted them when I was alone in his office. But it would be easy enough to tell him. I have you men in the hollow of my hand, and I don't want you to forget it!"

"No, Mr. Kennicott," the Deacon said dutifully.

"And don't ever believe," the banker went on, "that just because I wrote that letter to Tilghman you've got my hands tied. If I had to block you by admitting that I had been taken in by clever crooks, it would be considered an innocent mistake. As bank president and a substantial citizen in the community, I am above suspicion."

"Yes, Mr. Kennicott," the Deacon said, his long, sardonic face utterly unreadable. "You are in an enviable position. Wanted men like us have to work fast and move on. But a man like you has the confidence of the community. You can steal and steal and keep on stealing from those who trust you and yet never be suspected."

The banker glanced sharply at him, then decided that the statement was meant as a compliment. He permitted himself a smug smile.

"I am glad that you realize I have the whip hand," he said. "Then we can go ahead according to plan."

"Mr. Kennicott," the Deacon said earnestly, "I assure you that from the moment we talked with you we have never for an instant swerved from our original intention. I assure you also that we will carry out our original plans to the letter."

Always quick to look for double meanings in the Deacon's seemingly straightforward remarks, Buck turned aside to hide a sudden grin, then choked and burst into a fit of violent coughing. But Banker Kennicott seemed completely reassured by the statement.

"Good!" the banker exclaimed, putting the reward notices back into his pocket. "In a few days it will be up to you to persuade old Tilghman to take Gus Landon back as his foreman. That is extremely important. But right now it is an advantage for him not to have to be here. When we thought—" he glanced from one to another of the trio almost apologetically—"that you were double-crossing us, we decided to move the herd tonight, and Landon is already on his way out there."

He motioned in the direction of the Tumbling T ranch buildings. "Does anybody up there know that I was on my way out here?"

"No, Mr. Kennicott," Buck interposed, in exactly the tone of voice the Deacon had been using.

The fat banker nodded. "Then I won't go up right now. I have things to do at the bank before starting out for the hideout. In another day or two I will drop in to congratulate old Tilghman on the return of his son."

HE swung his horse about and rode back in the direction of the town. The trio waited until he was far enough away to be out of hearing. Then Buck Fleming gave way to an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"No, Mr. Kennicott," Buck mimicked. "Yes, Mr. Kennicott. Our original plans, I assure you, Mr. Kennicott!"

The Deacon turned his horse and started riding back toward the ranch house. . . .

Along about six o'clock ranchers and cowboys from other spreads began drifting in, and by dusk a band of around thirty men was ready to ride. There was a broad, square-faced blond cattleman named Van Camp, and five of his men; a tall, sharp nosed rancher named Parmelee with four. A man named Nile had brought one man with him, and another rancher who was in bed with a broken leg had sent three. Peter Tilghman, in spite of Emily's pleading, personally headed his group of ten.

When they were about ready to ride, the Deacon hunted out young Joe and took him aside along with Buck. Point by point he went over all the landmarks they had spotted the night before, making Joe repeat them until it was certain that he could find the rustler hideout. Then the Deacon issued orders.

"You ride into Sweetwater, Joe," he commanded, "and look for Banker Kennicott. If he is there, keep an eye on him until he rides out of town. After you are sure that he has gone, then go to the sheriff, tell him the rustled cattle have been located, and get him to deputize every able-bodied man in Agua Dulce and come along with you."

"The sheriff, Deacon?" Buck repeated doubtfully. "Are you sure you want—"

"The sheriff," the Deacon repeated firmly. "And every able-bodied man in town."

Joe started out, and presently the three badmen ranged themselves at the head of the valley cattlemen and the cavalcade started to move.

They went more slowly than they had the night previous, because the late moonrise made it more difficult to spot the landmarks they had selected as their guides. By the time the moon was full above the eastern mountains, the party had reached the foothills. Only a few minutes later, Buck Fleming pulled his horse over close to the Deacon's.

"Look!" he said softly. "Comin' round that foothill just ahead! It's our old friend Kennicott!"

The Deacon gave vent to a muttered curse. "Damn the luck!" he whispered. "We should have waited and caught him in the hideout with the rest! That man is a slippery customer, Buck. He'll talk himself out of this fix, you see if he doesn't."

He did. After getting over his first surprise, Banker Kennicott spun a credible tale about how he had been tipped off that afternoon by a range tramp, and had ridden out alone to test the truth of the story. The yarn completed, Banker Kennicott glared furtively at the trio and ranged himself boldly with the forces of law and order. He was with them when the guards at the canyon entrance were overpowered and the attacking cattlemen poured into the hidden valley, drove the rustlers back into the ranch house, and began pouring volley after volley of bullets into the ramshackle old structure.

Watching him, the Deacon saw that he was shooting to kill. And, later on, it was Banker Kennicott who crept in close, piled faggots against the tinder-dry walls, and set fire to the building.

THAT marked the end of the fighting. Men came streaming out of the front door with their hands high, followed by others bearing wounded men in their arms. The whole house was a flaming torch by the time the last rustler got out.

The Deacon caught Kennicott drawing a slow bead on Gus Landon, and slapped his gun aside just in time. The bullet plowed harmlessly into the ground.

"Nuh-uh," the Deacon reproved, staring into the banker's little eyes, wild in the red firelight. "The shooting has stopped. They've surrendered. From now on, the law will be in charge."

Half a dozen cowboys laid hold of Gus Landon and jerked him over to stand outside the widening area of heat. Banker Kennicott stepped calmly over and stood facing the man.

"The law," he repeated. "Of course you are right. He will be sentenced for rustling. It is true that if he has influential friends to speak to the Board of Pardons, he may be paroled in only a few months, but as law-abiding citizens that is out of our hands."

Unmasked before the valley cattlemen who had trusted him, Gus Landon had been cowering in the grasp of the cowboys. But at Kennicott's words a change came over him. He squared his shoulders and stared stolidly at his captors.

"You got me," he said hoarsely. "I'll do my time."

Behind him, the Deacon heard Buck's angry whisper. "You hear that, Deacon? Kennicott has promised to spring him, and Landon's agreed to keep his mouth shut! By god, that slippery banker has squeezed through our fingers after all!"

The Deacon stepped out into the firelight to face Gus Landon.

"I'm afraid it's not so simple as that, Mr. Kennicott," he flung over his shoulder. "A convicted rustler might hope to be paroled, but this man will be tried for attempted murder. We have had that oatmeal analyzed, Landon, and found it was dosed with arsenic. If they don't lynch you before you get there, you'll spend the rest of your life in prison."

Gus Landon staggered backward as though struck by a mighty fist.

"Poison?" he gasped. "Arsenic?"

He thrust forward to point a shaking finger at the fat banker.

"Damn you, Kennicott!" he screeched. "Damn you! You told me that stuff was a sleepin' powder to keep him drowsy so's he'd be in no shape to hunt for this valley!"

For the second time the Deacon slapped Kennicott's gun aside, this time knocking it out of his hand.

"I reckon that does it, Kennicott," he stated. "You won't be able to talk your-

self out of that!"

As if at a signal Pud Eiler came riding up with two saddled horses in tow. Buck and the Deacon swung up into their saddles, and the three bad men spurred through the narrow canyon which was the entrance to the valley. Behind them, Kennicott was mouthing curses and desperately pulling three folded reward notices from his pocket.

They were a good quarter mile beyond the valley entrance when Joe came along with the sheriff and his posse of townsmen. The Deacon reined in and spoke to the sheriff.

"If you hurry, Sheriff," he said, "you should be just in time to prevent a lynching. We won't go back with you, Joe can show you the way."

The three badmen drew their horses off the trail and waited while the sheriff and posse filed by. Then they rode calmly on, widening the distance between them and the rustler hideout.

"Where do we go now?" Pud Eiler asked after they had ridden for some time in silence.

"Where do you think?" the Deacon countered dryly.

There was something in his tone which made Buck Fleming straighten suddenly in his saddle. Then he slapped his thigh with a crack like a pistol shot.

"Every able-bodied man," he said in a tone which was almost reverent. "Every able-bodied man. Deacon, you old rascal, now I know why you sent Joe into town!"

The Deacon's black-garbed shoulders rose and fell in a characteristic gesture.

"The laborer," he drawled, "is worthy of his hire and Banker Kennicott promised us five thousand dollars. As Pud pointed out yesterday, we came to Agua Dulce—Sweetwater—to rob a bank. With every able-bodied male citizen of Agua Dulce temporarily out of town, it ought to be fairly easy to lift part of Kennicott's personal fortune—some of the dinero he received from the sale of rustled beef. He probably keeps it in that special safe in his office. . . .

Pud Eiler grunted in sudden comprehension. And Buck's sharp, joyous laughter echoed among the moonlit hills.

"If I Was in Your Boots, I'd Fade!"

THE cowpuncher who addressed the stranger in Pinon meant his remark kindly enough. He'd seen the stranger asking for trouble by tangling with Jay Burlingame, who had the backing of the tough Round Hat cowhands—and that was a mighty dangerous thing to do in this part of the country.

"I'm obliged," the stranger grinned. "I'm taking your tip."

But the stranger had no intention, really, of traveling further. He was here in Pinon City for a purpose—and he was ready to accept the challenge of Jay Burlingame and to face any others of his ilk. The stranger might be a mere "Dick Smith" to the crowd—but he was actually a Cattleman's Association man, and didn't know the meaning of "quit." For a novelet that throbs with the pulse-beat of the West, we recommend—

THE BRAND ARTIST, by WALT COBURN

FEATURED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!

Ham backs into a barrel cactus and starts buck-jumping like a spurred bronc

Ham's Photo Finish

by ALFRED L. GARRY

The slap-happy law dogs, Ham and Egg, tangle with a range-robbing Romeo when skulduggery rods the county!

MY DEPUTY, Ham, has got another one of his attacks of wisdom. Not that he's taken me into his confidence. No sir! He's as secretive as a miner with an unrecorded bonanza. He's got a book he keeps studying on the sly. Deep stuff. Ham's lips move glacier slow as he spells out the triple-jointed words. Sometimes his brow gulches up, and he frowns furious. Then, like a logging locomotive with a too long string of cars, he's got to back up and take another run at the sentence in order to get over the hump.

He's took to borrowing money too. On account he's sashaying around with Lulu-

bell Sweeney, the new biscuit shooter at the Hasty-Tasty Cafe. Not that anyone is going to get badly crippled when Ham forgets his financial obligations. His winter-gaunt string of credit don't assay over a couple of bucks in any direction.

Ham's got a sudden rash of other ideas, too.

"Egg," he says to me out of a clear sky. "Our jail ain't first class!"

"No one's busted out on us!" I boast.

"Shore," Ham nods. "But if we catch Rib Collins up to any of his smart aleck tricks, how yuh goin' to euchre a confession out of him? A hoot owl that's nephew to the political boss of all Montaner can't be pistol whipped into yappin'!"

"Ham, you idiot!" I bark. "You know I've never salvaged a confession out of a prisoner in my life!"

"There's always a first time!" Ham counters. "I ain't so shore yuh wouldn't like to make that first time Rib Collins!"

That ain't no lie. Rib is making me and my pardner look like a couple of long-eared jackasses, what with him promoting beef and gold dust right under our whiskers. Being slicker than a buffalo calf's nose, Rib Collins just thumbs his nose at the law. He's all-fired smart in never leaving a shred of evidence that'll hold up in court.

"What's fixing the jail got to do with getting a confession out of slippery Rib—provided we catch up with him?" I want to know, grasping for a straw.

"We should have a dungeon!" Ham proposes. "A black hole. A place where we can throw a prisoner, and let him soak in his own sins for a while. There's nothin' like a siege of bread and water in a black hole to soften up a tough hombre's resistance."

"Maybe," I nod. "But a fat chance we have of getting the money from the county commissioners for fixing up a dungeon."

"I sorta got a use for a black room," Ham suggests, a hopeful gleam in his eyes. "Perhaps I could—"

He don't get to finish. A rider racks into town, brakes his pinto to a four-footed slide in front of our office, and clumps in fast.

"Better get out to the Cross Hoop," he says. "Old man Horgen is frothing at the mouth. Rib Collins has pulled a humdinger," he finishes with a grin.

"Come on, Ham," I say, reaching for my Winchester. "Darb Horgen is tighter than the bark on the tree. If Rib's knicked his bank roll, we'd better get there before he blows a gasket!"

"Can't," Ham reminds me. "Remember, I'm summoned on that land case over in Buckstrap County."

"Yeah," I crack. "But I'll bet you'll be back in time to keep your date with that hash slinging filly!"

"I ain't forgettin' law's our business," Ham replies, reaching for that book on how to bulldoze confessions, *Darkroom Technic*.

I mount up and lash out to Cross Hoop. Things are popping like a tromped on ants' nest. Distant dust trails of hard riders criss-cross the range, and the home ranch is in a bustling sweat of activity.

I pull up in front of Darb Horgen, who's bellowing orders like a foreman at a break in the levee. He regards me sour as he shouts to a waddie bringing up a cavvy of fine quarter hosses.

"They tally!" he roars. "Rib didn't get any of 'em!"

"What's up?" I ask. "Put me on Rib Collins' trail!"

"I'll put you and that lard pants deputy of yours on the trail to the Old Soldiers' Home!" Horgen raves. "You've let Rib Collins rib the wrong hombre! Either you get him, or I'll get you—if I have to run for sheriff myself!"

"What—" I insist.

"Look!"

HORGEN'S quivering trigger finger points to the home corral. It's crowded with about the most miserable, gaunt-ribbed collection of canners that I've ever seen. You could hang your hat on the hip bones of any of them skinny steers, and use their ribs for a washboard. A hide and tallow works wouldn't pay six-bits a head for 'em.

"For five years I've been trying to get the beef contract for the railroad," Horgen rants. "Finally the superintendent of the line and his staff said they'd pay me a visit at the ranch to look over the quality of my beef. For two months I kept fifty choice two years olds close herded on bunch grass. Three weeks ago, I had 'em driven into the home corral, and stuffed grain

into them until they were as fat as prize cattle.

"Then what happens?" Horgen's blood pressure mounts. His face gets red. I plumb fear he's going to blow his gasket as he repeats, "What happens? The railroad party arrives after dark. I wine 'em and dine 'em, like the big shots they are. All the time boasting about the fine prime critters I'll show 'em in the morning.

"We ride out to inspect my choice steers. And what happens?" Horgen roars, the veins on his forehead knotting like a pilgrim's rope. "We break over the hill and look down on them miserable fugitives from a glue works."

"Rib Collins played a joke on you, eh?" I grin lopsided. "Switched cattle."

"Joke! Joke!" Horgen rants. "The railroad party takes one look and leaves me flat! Rib Collins just ribbed me out of a five thousand dollar a year beef contract!"

"I'll spur after them and explain—"

"You'll not!" Horgen snaps. "Get out there and cut for Rib Collins' trail! And alone! My boys and the guards from my Eagle Peak mine are out rounding up them two year olds. They won't have enough tallow on 'em to grease a handcar, after the way that scoundrel choused them!"

Rib shore has his fun. I cut his trail, and follow it while he scattered that herd from here to breakfast. Then, I lose his sign in the shale slides of the Bearpaw Mountains. That young whippersnapper gives me the slip complete.

I mog back into Sweetgrass, my head hanging shameful. Ham, grinning from ear to ear meets me.

"Too bad yuh ain't got Rib," he says. "I got the black hole all ready for him. Come look."

Ham's got one of the jail cells sealed off and blacked out. He clangs the door shut. There ain't a ray of light gets into the place. It's darker than the devil's heart.

"Where'd you get the money for the material to do the job?" I ask cautious, sniffing the smell of tar paper.

"Oh, I promoted it," Ham dismisses airily.

When we get back to the office, Pete Konsmo, a nester we thought had been drouthed off his place, is waiting for us. He's mad as hops.

"I got a job for you lawmen!" he raves. "I been worse than robbed. Some snake has vandalized my home!"

"What's happened?" I ask.

"Every bit of tar paper has been stripped off my shack!" Pete cries. "Every bit! It's bad enough to try to make a living off this goshforsaken dry land, without having my home ruined the minute my back is turned!"

"Most like, someone figgered yuh was gone for good," Ham offers.

I wheel on my pardner. But he's got his head in the bottom drawer of his desk. He's rummaging around furious as a hungry hound searching for a lost bone.

"Was shore I had a bottle here," Ham's muffled voice comes from below his desk top. "But I ain't. Egg, yuh take Pete over to Freddie's Bar and buy him a drink. Put it on my bar bill!"

"By all means," I say hastily, taking Pete by the arm and steering him toward Freddie's before he can sniff the tar paper of our black cell.

BUT don't think them salving drinks I buy Pete are ever put on Ham's bar bill. No sir. That lummox has used up his string of tick at Freddie's a long spell back. When I return to the office, I pin down Ham's shifty eye.

"Listen, you addle-pated donkey," I level. "It's bad enough to have the cattlemen and miners out against us because the way Rib Collins is chousing them. But now you've almost gotten the nesters on our tail by stealing the tar paper off of Pete Konsmo's shack!"

"Yeah, yeah." Ham blinks, looking up startled like, when he sees who is clumping across our porch.

He quickly mutters something about being late for a date with Lulubell Sweeney, and skins out the back door in a hurry, just as Will Oswald, the station agent, comes into our office. He reports the theft of a red lantern from a siding switch. Ham usually takes care of such piddling stuff, so I set down at his desk to write a note about it when Oswald leaves. My toe strikes something. I take a look.

Cached under Ham's desk is that red lantern!

I know what! Rib Collins, who has more nerve than Jessie James, has put that red lantern under Ham's desk! A danger signal. A warning for Ham to stop! Two different waddies have reported to me con-

fidential that they have seen Lulubell Sweeney riding in the dark with a jasper who shapes up mighty like Rib Collins. I've got to have a talk with that gal!

I make sure Ham ain't hanging around, and slide into the Hasty-Tasty Cafe. I no sooner get sat at the counter, when Lulubell flounces out of the kitchen. She sets a glass of water down in front of me, and jerks a pencil from the scanty bun of her tightly clawed back hair.

Now, Lulubell might have been good looking if she didn't have a tooth missing smack-dab in the center of her moon face. Her mug might not have stopped an eight day clock, but it shore as heck would put an awful strain on the works. Also she's got the figure and heft of a prize shorthorn. But she's got one thing in her favor. She's a female woman in a section of Montaner where single gals are as scarce as gamblers in heaven.

"What'll you have, Sheriff?" she titters.

"A talk with you." I level. "I got reports that you are keeping company with that scalawag, Rib Collins. He's law wanted. You tip me off the next time you have a date with him."

"I'll do no such thing!" Lulubell snaps with a darn site more spunk than her looks would lead you to suspect. "You're just afraid of me! Scared I'm going to take away your han'some, artistic-souled deputy, Ham! Why, mister, it's a downright shame the way you overwork that poor sensitive man! You are always forcing all the disagreeable and dangerous law work on him. Rib has told me all about it! I keep Rib Collins informed of Ham's plans. So Rib can operate where Ham ain't! Why—"

I beat a hasty retreat, snorting to myself, "Sensitive! Han'some! Artistic souled!"

What kind of malarky has Ham been handing her? And ain't Rib the smart one to make capital of it! No wonder we can't get within gunshot of that smart aleck hoot owl! By playing on Lulubell's infatuation, he's put the pump handle on her for fair!

Then I halt in my tracks! Infatuation! It's plain to see Lulubell Sweeney wears her heart on her sleeve! Perhaps I can do a little switching!

FOLKS, when I find out what that sly deceitful pardner of mine is up to, I'm plumb ashamed for him. First off, two packages arrive at the express office for Ham. He's as secretive about them as a newlywed with a Christmas present for his bride. He waits until he thinks I've sashayed out of town, then gets the packages, and hotfoots for the office.

I creep close just in time to hear the peculiar clang of the door he's fixed on our dungeon cell. Ham steps out into the corridor and blows out that red railroad lantern! What the—? And under his arm he has what looks to be six little black books!

I fade back into the barn. Cripes! Ham has rented a buggy with a fine team. I shinny up into the hay loft. My knothole glued eye just about pops out as Ham comes out the back door.

For on my pardner's head, instead of his sweat stained sombrero, is a cloth hat that looks like an oversized sourdough hotcake, except that it's bright blue and pulled down rakishly on one side. He's got on a puffy orange silk shirt, and around his neck is one of them green Windsor ties like the fellers playing artist parts on the stage wear. The only thing that looks natural about the lummox is his six-guns belted around his Levis.

Ham puts a suitcase he's carrying into the buggy, clucks the team into a start, and heads for the outskirts of town. Needless to say, I mount up and take right out after him. As he passes the rooming house, he puts his finger to his mouth, whistles shrilly. The door flies open like the door on a cuckoo clock, and Lulubell Sweeney pops out. She's dressed fit to kill!

They set off at a fast clip up the little used road along the Milk River. At Lover's Bend, so called because all the spooners use it, Ham stops, loosens the checkreins, and ties up the team. Ham leads Lulubell, who minces dainty as a two year old heifer in a show ring, to the little spooning place alongside of the stream.

I ground-tie my bronc. Like a Blackfoot raising a mountain man's scalp, I worm my way through the rocks until I'm looking down on them from twenty feet.

"Madam," Ham beams, as he sets Lulubell down on a rock, "the re-fractured light from the gray granite stones and sparklin' water soften the contours of yore face until yuh are a dead ringer for Mona Lisa!"

"Say," Lulubell bristles skeptically,

"Who'd you say? Moaning Lizzie? Who's she?"

"A woman in a famous paintin'," Ham explains.

"Humph!" Lulubell snorts, patting her hair. "That beret and windsor tie don't make you no artist."

"My art surpasses that of the canvas and brush!" Ham recites loftily.

Ham takes a three stick dingus from his suitcase. It makes a tripod like the round-up cooks use to hang the kettle over the fire. Ham screws a black box on top of that tripod. Then he brings out a big black cloth. Ham's got one of them picture taking rigs! He bends over, sticks his head under the black cloth, and points the lens at Lulubell. She preens herself like a peacock, and splits her face into a toothy smile—toothy, that is, except for the missing tusk smack-dab in the center of her punkin face.

Ham's having considerable trouble focusing. Keeping his head under the black cloth, he picks up the tripod and moves the camera closer to Lulubell. That don't suit the new artistic soul of his. Ham commences to back up slowly.

"Whoa!" I commence to yelp, then bite my tongue.

Ham, bent way over with his head under that black cloth like an ostrich, is heading for trouble. Only he ain't heading. Just the reverse. He's backing into grief. Ham rams the broad seat of his tight stretched Levis square into a spiney barrel cactus!

"Ouch!"

HAM erupts from under the black cloth like a jack-in-the-box. Buck-jumping in a circle like a school teacher what's set on a tack, Ham claps both hands behind, squirming like an eel and yelping bloody murder.

Ham bellyflops across a rock while Lulubell pulls out the big cactus thorns. Pretty soon they are ready for another try at photography. Lulubell sits on the rock, and Ham, with many a cautious backward glance, sticks his head under the black cloth and commences to focus.

"Lulubell," he says with a frown, "The book says all great artists detract from the bad features of a model by emphasizing their good points. Like if Mike Angle-low had to paint a woman with a wart on her nose, he'd paint a han'some pair of ear rings on her ears so's people would look at 'em instead of the wart on her snoot. I got an idear."

Ham advances on Lulubell and boldly raises her skirt to the top of her high buttoned shoes, like them fancy fillies in the Barbershop Gazette.

"Why, Ham! Such liberties!" Lulubell squeeks with outraged virtue. "Desist!"

With that, plumb ladylike Lulubell fetches Ham a roundhouse wallop alongside the head. Ham staggers, gets his balance, and shakes his head like a hard busted steer.

"Madam, a thousand pardons!" Ham bows low from the waist. "I must have let my artistic temperament overcome my plumb refined nature!"

"Mr. Hamilton, I'd have you know I'm a sure-enough lady!" Miss Lulubell Sweeney simpers carefully chamoising her nose. "But I'll forgive you!"

Ham is just clicking his first picture when I hear something off to the left. It ain't much more than the sound a lizzard makes running off a hot rock. I've scouted too many Apaches to jerk up. Carefully, I twist my head, riveting my eyes in the direction of the round.

Among the rocks, I see it. The peak of a sombrero. Someone, who don't know I'm around, is spying on Ham and Lulubell. I hunker down. The sombrero commences to lift. I slowly ease my gun in the holster. Even if he is locoed, I ain't having anyone drygulch my pardner.

My thumb takes up the hammer slack. At the first sign of a gun muzzle, I'm all set to blast. The sombrero continues to rise. I center my front sight on his forehead. Then I see the hombre's eyes, and slack off. They're not the close slitted eyes of a cold blooded killer. Them eyes are crinkled in silent laughter. I unwrap my tense fingers from around my walnut as the grinning face of Rib Collins shoves above the rocks.

I can throw down and collect Rib Collins as easy as pie. But a sheriff can't just arrest the nephew of the political boss of Montaner without more evidence than we have. We know that young grinning rascal is lifting gold and prime cattle right and left, and raising good natured hell in general with the big outfits.

He never takes anything from prospec-

tors, nesters, or the hard pressed two-by-four spreads. In fact he's given so many of them a lift, that poor folks take him for sort of a Robin Hood. Which is one reason we can't ever get any evidence that'll hold in court against him.

Rib watches Ham at his photography for a minute. Then he sneaks back toward the road. I Injun right after him. He unties Ham's team, winds the reins around the whipstock, and heading the hosses toward town, smacks them with his quirt. They high-tail for Sweetgrass like a house afire.

Ham scrambles out of the rocks, growling like an angry badger. Rib pulls up about three hundred yards away, wheels his mount, and gives a derisive reb yell. That does it. Ham's enraged fists streak to his hips. He flashes both guns. But before he can slip a hammer, Lulubell batters into him. She throws her arms about my pardner, spoiling his aim.

"Don't you dare shoot!" she screams. "Ham, don't you dare!"

Now, ain't that an eyebrow raiser in my favor!

I got to wrastle with my scruples. I conquer my better nature right soon, and let them two slog it back to Sweetgrass. There ain't nothing like a long hot dusty trek to squelch a lop-sided romance. Before they get in sight of Sweetgrass, Lulubell is berating Ham mighty shrill.

And Ham! Poor Ham! He's shore a deflated peacock. His beautiful artist's clothes are dusty and sweatstained as he clumps along set-jawed and weary. It's shore going to take a lot of them flagons of suds at Freddie's to wash this day out of his system!

DARB HORGEN is pacing back and forth in our office like a caged panther when I get back. His face is as black as a renegade's heart as he champs savage on his unfired cigar.

"Where'n'll you been?" he barks.

"Trying to get within pistol range of Rib Collins," I say.

"Oh," he grunts, somewhat smoothed. "Get a slug into him?"

"Nope."

"Incompetent nincompoop!" Horgen roars. "Why didn't you?"

"What's he done to you now?"

"Lifted the sluice box clean-up at my Eagle Peak Mine!"

"Did any of your help see him?" I want to know. "Any positive identification?"

"No! He threw a sack over the head of my superintendent, and locked him up in the powder magazine."

"No witnesses then, except your Chinese muckers?" I ask.

"Not even them!" Horgen roars. "With my dust, Rib Collins played fan-tan with the Chinamen. They all won a stake! Every pigtail has jumped the job and gone back to Butte. There's not a single witness!"

I've got to smile at that. Darb Horgen is too tight to pay decent wages. His Chinese muckers seldom accumulate a big enough stake to be able to jump their job. Rib Collins just did for them poor coolies what Abe Lincoln did for Uncle Tom's folks.

All the time Horgen is ranting, Ham sits in his chair, his chin in his cupped hand. His brow wrinkles furious as thoughts bubble and stew in his gyro head. Suddenly, he springs from his chair, leveling a trigger finger at Horgen.

"Shut up!" he barks. "Horgen, yuh can't prove that it was Rib Collins who held up yore mine! For all the legal evidence yuh got, it might have been the man in the moon! It'll take real cash money to get somethin' on that smart aleck!"

Horgen rocks back on his heels. He's a big frog in our puddle. Ain't used to being bellowed at. Especially by an office holder. He gets red in the face, puffs up like a hop toad, and is about to lash out with a torrent of condemnation.

"Ham's right!" I clip, just as he opens his mouth. "You got to put up a reward!"

Horgen holds his tongue, regarding me sour.

"All right," he grouches grudgingly. "I'll put up a five hundred buck reward to rid the county of Rib Collins."

"Write it out just that way," Ham dictates. "Five hundred dollars for makin' Rib Collins vamoose from Sweetgrass County."

Well, sir, Horgen's reward acts on Ham just like a feeding of grain on a bronc. Sudden ambition rowels him. At dusk, he shaves close, grabs an empty grain sack, and disappears. Now, it's a cinch he ain't going out to collect Rib Collins in that sack. So I skulk after him.

Ham Injuns down the alley until he's in back of Hop Sing's laundry. He skins over the high back fence. In a few minutes he tosses the grain sack back over the fence and shinnys after it. He looks like Santa with his pack as he high-tails back to our barn.

Folks, I've seen Ham do the darnedest things. But I shore can't tie this one. Ham sheds his shirt and Levis, stripping to his red flannels. He then fastens his rawhide lariat to a corral post, backs up the length of it, and ties the other end tight about his hips. Then, revolving 'round and 'round like a spool, he commences to wind the rope about him. He groans pitiful as he reefs back hard and the slim rope cuts into his soft corporation. By the time he's wound himself up to the corral post, the rope is coiled from his hips to up under his arms.

The big full moon shoves up over the hills, revealing my pardner. Gone is his belt lopping belly. Instead, Ham's lariat has lashed his figure into a hourglass shape. Kind of washboardy though. Little rolls of blubber are bulging out between the straining rope coils.

Ham grabs the grain sack, shakes something out, and wrastles himself into it. A woman's dress! Ham's robbed the Chinaman's clothesline!

The tight wound lariat moulds Ham's figure into the dress most seductive. But only after he's ripped out the built in bustle. His natural one is slightly more than ample copious.

With his bowie knife, Ham slashes at his sombrero. The penned up turkey we're fattening for the holidays squawks bloody murder as Ham jerks out a handful of tail feathers. He jams the feathers into his hat band, and pops the creation on his head. Over it he drapes a couple of yards of hoss fly netting. No veiled picture hat out of Paris ever looked crazier—or more alluring.

HAM places his fist far back on his hip, and elbow akimbo takes a few mincing steps. He's shore full of tantalizing come-on as he prances back and forth like a stage-acting filly. Hoisting his skirts like no lady, Ham cuts through alleys and back lots until he comes to Lulubell's rooming house.

Ham works around in back, humps low under the curtained windows as he hugs the side walls, and creeps up onto the front porch. He straightens up before the front door, like he's just stepped out of it. Switching his bustle and mincing dainty, Ham walks boldly down the front walk. He turns toward the river path, dallying now and then in the bright moonlight to daintily pluck a wild rose. Holding it delicately between thumb and forefinger, he graciously wafts its sweet perfume. A wondrous coy and dainty maid is my pardner—about the size of a brick smokehouse!

I'm skulking right in his shadow. A soft low whistle sounds from the jumbled rocks on the far side of the river. Ham strains forward, harkening, one hand cupped eagerly behind his ear, and the other raised expressively to his heart.

"Lulubell, darlin'?"

It's a soft whisper, vibrant with quivering emotion.

"'Tis me!" Ham titters in a high falsetto.

There's the quick splash of a spurred bronc fording the river. Rib Collins bulks large in the moonlight as he swings off his hoss.

"Lulubell, I knew you would keep this tryst with me!" he murmurs passionately.

"Darlin'!" Ham snickers, digging a toe in the dust.

Rib raises his arms to embrace Ham. Suddenly, he hesitates, for an instant he sniffs the air, like a wolf casting for a strange scent. He wirls toward the river, holding his outstretched arms toward the gorgeous setting moon.

"Lulubell, my darling," he breathes in a husky vibrant voice. "Come, stand at the river's edge with me so we together may watch the dancing moonbeams on the quick water."

Ham minces forward.

"Lulubell," Rib cries eagerly, his arm curved to encircle Ham's wasp waist, "Sway close to me!"

I see Ham's muscles bunch for the clutch as he lurches close.

Wham!

Rib smashes into my pardner like a battering ram. Ham reels off the river brink, sprawling. He lands midstream with a mighty splash. Cussing most unladylike, gulping and sputtering with the sudden shock of the chilled water, Ham claws for the shore.

"My darlin' sheriff!" Rib mocks between gales of whooping laughter. "You really shouldn't use such smelly bay rum after shaving!"

I Apache up behind hilarious Rib, and jam the business end of my cutter into the small of his back. He stiffens.

"Reach!" I growl. "Assaulting a peace officer is a jail offence in this county!"

"Lock him in the black cell!" sodden and dripping Ham chatters when we get our prisoner back to the jailhouse.

The next morning I commence to stir up the sourdoughs for us and our prisoner.

"Nix!" Ham shakes his head. "We're eatin' out. Follow my lead."

We clump down to the Hasty-Tasty Cafe. Lulubell flounces out to wait on us.

"Have you been taking any more photograph pictures lately?" she asks Ham archly. "I'd sure like to see them you took of me."

"I ain't had a chance to develop the plates," Ham mumbles between knife loads of hotcakes. "Also I guess I'll have to side track developing yore picture's for a while. I got sort of a rush job on my hands."

"Rush job?" Lulubell asks, curious as a magpie. "Lawing, or pictures?"

"Both." Ham lies faster than a hoss can trot. "I was photographin' some scenery the other day when I saw a disturbance at Horgen's Eagle Peak mine. A hold-up. I didn't have my guns with me. But I crept up close and got half a dozen pictures of that smart aleck outlaw, Rib Collins, cleanin' out the sluice boxes."

WE DON'T pay any attention to Lulubell's sharp startled intake of breath at the mention of Rib's name.

"Yep," Ham goes on. "That wisenheimer, Collins, always saw to it that there were no witnesses to his hoot-owlin'. But he shore missed this time. Them photographs of mine will plumb land him for a long stretch in the Deer Lodge pen.

"Shore thing," Ham concludes, as we finish our last cup of coffee. "Rib is goin' to be a mighty surprised jasper when I spring them pictures at his trial."

"Trial?" Lulubell gasps.

"You bet!" Ham replies. "Now, crumble me a loaf of bread in a bowl."

"What on earth for?" Lulubell inquires.

"We got Rib Collins in the black dungeon I fixed up for a dark room," Ham explains off handedly. "We're puttin' him on bread an' water."

Lulubell grasps the back counter for support. Her mouth gapes like a fly trap. All a flutter, she stampedes into the kitchen to fix the bread.

Back in our office, Ham rummages around in the bowl of broken up bread. Shore enough, from the bottom, he pulls a tightly wadded scrap of paper. The unfolded note reads:

Darling Rib,

Ham has took pictures of you at the Eagle Peak Mine. I will help you escape. Be ready. We will flee together.

Lulubell.

Ham carries the bread with the refolded note and a jug of water to Rib in the black cell. In a few minutes Rib rattles the cell door.

"He's found the note." Ham grins, asking Rib what he wants.

"I'm out of matches to light my quirlies." Rib lies.

Ham passes him some matches so he can read Lulubell's note. An hour later, my partner picks up the red lantern and lights it.

"What the heck?" I want to know.

"Come on," Ham jerks his head toward the cells.

I follow him as he unlocks Rib's blacked out cell.

"Put Collins in another cell for a while," Ham says in a loud voice. "I've got some mighty important photograph plates to develop. It's got to be done in a dark room with a red light."

Collins blinks anxious as I transfer him to the next cage. Ham disappears into the black cell. Rib paces back and forth, ill at ease, nervous as a caged cougar.

Ham pops his head out of the dark room.

"Egg, Egg!" he yips joyful. "Come an' look! Them Eagle Peak pictures are certainly goin' to be pippins!"

I scramble back through the cell block. Ham pulls me into the dark hole, clapping my back, and making a lot of triumphant sounds.

Rib has his face shoved between the bars of his cell door as we come out. Glistening beads of anxious sweat dot his brow.

"Ain't—ain't you guys goin' to show me

them pictures?" he asks with mock cheerfulness.

Ham whirls on him, bristling with sudden fury.

"You've stubbed yore toe at last, Rib Collins!" Ham thunders, leveling his quivering trigger finger at the completely deflated hoot owl. "You'll see these pictures, all right! At the proper time! In court!"

"You danged tootin'!" I back up Ham. "And you shore ain't going to like 'em a nickle's worth, Rib!"

It's a cinch Rib's going to go on a nervous diet of finger nails!

LATE that afternoon Lulubell shows up with a covered picnic basket. "I've brought you a cake, Ham," she beams like a halloween pumpkin.

Lulubell opens her basket and sets a three story coconut cake on Ham's desk, as she goes on, "I've also brought one for poor Rib. I know you boys won't mind."

"Shore not," Ham mumbles through a mouthful of cake, nodding toward the cells, "Take it down to him."

"Hey, ain't you going to examine—" I commence.

"Nix!" Ham grins with a quick wink.

"Ham, Ham," Rib calls from his cell, "Please fetch me some water. This cake of Lulubell's is mighty dry."

"O.K." Ham replies, cheerful, "I got some coffee here."

"You come too, Egg," Lulubell calls in a honey voice. "We'll have a party."

"Shore," Ham accepts the invite for me. "Come on, Egg."

We just get in front of Rib's cell when he whips up a stub barreled gambler's gun. Lulubell's cake frosting is still sticking to it.

"Hoist 'em, you knot-headed mossbacks!" Rib whoops with laughter. "You simple dumbbells! You fell for the oldest gag in prisons. Shuck them ca'tridge belts."

"Shore. Shore!" Ham whines in a quavering voice, getting rid of his guns in a hurry. "Slack off on that trigger will yuh!"

I follow his lead, and do likewise.

"Lulubell, darlin'," Rib coos, "Take that key from Ham, and let me out."

"Yes, dearest! How romantic!" Lulubell gushes, unlocking the cell. "We'll flee together and will be married by the first parson we meet!"

Rib rears back, like a hoss wanting to go back to its stall in a stable fire.

For a minute I think that he's going to lock himself back in the cell. But liberty is sweet.

"Yes, yes!" he mutters quickly, waving us into his cell with his pistol. "I'll ride on ahead. I'll write you. We'll meet in Mexico and be married there."

"No need!"

Rib and Lulubell whirl. Standing in the doorway, a double barreled sawed-off cradled at his hip is Judge Mirander. Rib's got more sense than to buck a scatter gun. His gun clatters to the floor.

"Ham, are these the folks yuh asked me to bring along a shotgun for their weddin'?" the judge asks.

"Yep!" Ham grins. "Now, Lulubell, yuh unlock us. Egg, here, will give yuh away proper, an' I'll be the best man."

"Now—" Rib commences to buck like a bay steer.

"Remember my pictures!" Ham blares, whirling on Rib. "Yuh marry Lulubell, and we'll let yuh elope—providing you'll sign a statement that yuh'll never again set foot in Montaner. That's all we need to collect the reward!"

Judge Mirander ties the knot, charging Rib five bucks for the job, which sorta adds insult to injury. The judge also witnesses the statement Rib signs, making it plumb legal, so's tight old Horgen can't wriggle out of the reward.

"Pardner," I say, as Rib and his blushing bride start for the door, "To make it complete, you should get a wedding photograph of the happy couple."

Ham's face falls like a bride's first cake as he shoos them out the door.

"Egg, didn't I tell yuh?" Ham moans. "Lulubell's mug plumb busted the camera the very first time I tried it!"

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

HAM'S BITTER PILL

Another Ham and Egg Howler by ALFRED L. GARRY

A Painted Post novelet

REST for

CHAPTER I

Wakeup's Last Sleep

AFTER many rainless months, the desert water hole was bone-dry. A groan escaped the exhausted traveler's parched, swollen lips. But in almost the next instant, his sunken bloodshot eyes lighted with feverish hope as he beheld the sign stuck in sun-baked mud—a sign with a pointing arrow and the one scrawled, blessed word *"water."*

He let go his supporting hold on the pack saddle of his gaunt, droop-eared burro. With an eager, wordless croak the man staggered past the sign, toward a mesquite clump where the arrow pointed. He saw, hung on a limb well out of reach of marauding animals, a symbol of all that he had lived and hoped for in the weary, torturing miles behind him.

It was only a canvas-covered canteen, but nothing on earth could have looked

by TOM GUNN

He lifted the gun to a trembling aim as Steele, in the lead, bore down on him

Sheriff Blue Steele and his deputy tackle a case dealing with the desert's oldest law—the water code!

the WICKED

better to him just then. He lurched to it and seized it between trembling hands.

He shook it, only once. Then a tragic cry rose from his throat. His knees buckled. The canteen slid from his grasp. An empty canteen!

He could endure no more. He fell headlong. He didn't move again.

The burro, being an emotionless creature by nature and harsh experience, was spared the cruel mockery that had shattered the strength and spirit of the man. But it, too, was in a sorry condition from thirst. With a despairing nibble at a tough wisp of dead salt grass, it roamed on through the dead world of sand and heat.

* * * *

That evening Sheriff Blue Steele and his little redheaded deputy, "Shorty"

Watts, lazed in the crimson afterglow of an August sunset in front of the jail office at Painted Post. In the middle of a yawn, Shorty glimpsed a slow-plodding object approaching them across the wastelands to the south.

"Hullo, looks like we're due for a visitor, Sheriff," he observed. "Some ol' prospector, I'd say, from the load on that pack critter."

Steele's sharp, rock-gray eyes already had spotted the animal and noticed its distress. There was a troubled pucker between his brows as he flicked a cigarette butt to the dust.

"I don't see the other half o' that desert rat combination, *segundo,*" he retorted. "Also, that burro is about played out."

The little deputy blinked and looked again. True, no man was in sight. And the small animal weaved weakly as it neared them. Steele was on his feet now, making for it. Shorty trotted after him.

When they reached the burro, it nuzzled the sheriff's outstretched hand in dumb pleading. Moments later, the two of them were watering the spent animal from a bucket at the gate of the town corral.

As it drank, they faced one another gravely. No need to utter what was in their thoughts. Arizona's terrific midsummer heat had doomed many a lone traveler. By all indications some luckless wanderer had made his last journey on this blazing day.

Shorty dropped the cinch and lifted the hundred-pound pack and pack saddle from the burro's sweaty back. Together, they unroped the dust-covered tarp and fell to examining the load.

A pair of grubby blankets, a few fire-blackened cooking utensils and a meager stock of provisions—those were the main items. The pack also contained pick, shovel, gold pan and a small canvas ore sack that was empty, save for one small but heavy specimen of quartz, shot with metallic glints. Finally, inside a rolled-up sleeping mat of coarse, woven grass, they found the one clue to the identity of the burro's owner.

It was a crudely sketched map of some unnamed locality, and on it in faded ink the wavering signature, "Wakeup Riley".

They finished their examination of the scant belongings in tight-lipped silence. Then Shorty blurted:

"My guess, Sheriff, is that Mister Wakeup Riley, whoever he is, has took his last sleep. Somewhere down yonder along the Border.

Steele straightened his lean six feet and gazed out in the direction from which the burro had come.

"There's a bare chance that he made the water hole at Frying Pan Sink, *segundo,*" he said.

"Migosh, if he did, it's mighty lucky for him that we stashed that filled canteen there awhile back!"

"I figured it might save somebody's life, maybe our own—with the waterhole dried up and no other in miles of it."

THEY acted in quick unison, without further discussion. Dropping the gate bars, Shorty loosened the burro at the feed rack. They caught up and saddled their horses—the sheriff's sleek, fast steel-dust gelding and Shorty's pinto bronc. They rode at a lope into the fading twilight. The stars were out when they reached Hourglass Canyon. They traversed the dim, rugged trail that led on southward, until the gap widened and opened into a sandy wash that fanned out onto the Frying Pan.

Across that nearly bare expanse of blowsand lay the sole route connecting Indian County, Steele's bailiwick, with the wild desert mountains of upper Sonora.

A bright, round moon was rising when they reined up at the water hole. Steele swung from leather and dropped rein. He saw boot tracks in the alkali-encrusted bottom of the dry oasis. He strode to the mesquite clump. He dropped on one knee beside the still, stiffened body. One touch of a gnarled hand told him that "Wakeup" Riley was beyond mortal aid.

"We're too late, *segundo,*" he called out in a somber voice.

Shorty peeled from the pinto and when he rushed to the mesquite, Steele was holding the canteen, peering at it closely in the moonlight.

He thrust it at Shorty, pointing to a jagged bullet hole that had pierced the hanging canteen and emptied it.

"I reckon that tells the story," he said grimly.

"Glory be!" exploded Shorty. "It don't seem possible that any human varmint

could be mean enough tuh pull such a low-down trick!"

Steele shrugged one shoulder.

"Whoever fired that bullet is a murderer, *segundo!*" he said, his voice brittle. "Just as guilty, by rights, as thought he's shot this man."

"Yuh blamed right he is!" blazed Shorty. Then he studied the bullet hole closely. "It's the work of a thirty-thirty, I'd say."

"Which doesn't give us much to go on. About everybody in the Border country owns a thirty."

"Shore, that's right!" Shorty agreed glumly. "Arizona Territory is full o' thirty-thirty Winchesters, all alike."

"Except that no two rifles make exactly the same kind of firin'-pin mark."

"Mebbeso. But what does that get us, without the empty cartridge tuh go by?"

STEELE reached for makings in the flap pocket of his worn calfskin vest and thoughtfully rolled a smoke.

"Chances are, the shot was fired inside one hundred yards, at a mark the size o' this two-gallon canteen."

"Migosh, Sheriff, don't tell me yuh figger on makin' a search on the thousand tuh one chance that—"

"It's mostly bare, open ground hereabouts. And the moon'il be high in another three-four hours," Steele said persuasively. "Light as day, almost."

Shorty heaved a sigh of resignation. It meant a tedious wait. He chafed at inaction and delay. And he had no hope at all that they would find the wanted evidence.

Midnight neared before they started their slow, circling search around the water hole. Shorty started with one final, futile protest.

"Even if that ornery canteen-shooter was fool enough tuh shuck out his empty in this vicinity, a windstorm could easy o' covered it up in the meantime."

But determination—plus luck and owl-like vision—favored the sheriff. Beside a dwarfed cholla, easy gun distance from the mesquite, he saw a gleam of reflected moonlight. Eagerly he pounced on a bright, brass cylinder.

Shortly before the dawn of another torrid day, Steele and Shorty were back in Painted Post. With the body of a man tentatively identified as that of one Wake-up Riley, and the .30-30 empty.

DOC CRABTREE, like a good many other active and useful citizens, had come to Arizona Territory to improve his health. He remained to take up medical practice. Nobody else had the professional qualifications, so he became coroner of Indian County.

He was a small, nervous man with a sharp nose and disposition, shiny pince-nez specs and a jutting dab of billygoat beard. His office and living quarters were in the ramshackle upstairs above the Painted Post Saloon.

It became Doc's official duty to take charge of the remains of the prospector.

A further duty devolved on "Dictionary" Smith, the town handyman. That duty consisted on hammering together a rough-board coffin, then at Doc's order placing the coffin across two chairs in the saloon, with the body reposing in it.

"Now look here!" protested the slick-haired, sad-eyed bartender, "Thimble" Jack. "Mebbe a corpse is a cheerful business attraction tuh you, Doc, but not tuh me it ain't! What for yuh displayin' it in my place? And what's more important, for how long?"

"Fuddle duddle!" exclaimed Doc, brushing away the objection with an impatient gesture. "Has anybody in these parts ever seen this man before, or know anything about him? For some reason, the sheriff is mighty insistent to find out. So what's better than having him handy here, in this popular gathering place, where your customers can size him up?"

"It's a bum proposition for me, just the same!" grumbled the other. "A dead man ain't likely tuh buy much likker!"

"That just shows what a poor head you've got for business!" Doc pointed out tartly. "This deceased party, he'll help you sell a flock of drinks as the news gets around!"

For once, a Crabtree prognosis proved correct. Early that morning, "Magpie" Stevens started his twice-weekly trip to Cottonwood. The gap-toothed, gabby old stage driver spread the story of the water-hole victim as he traveled sixty miles northward.

Thus by evening, twenty-four hours after the ominous arrival of the stray

pack burro in Painted Post, ranchers and cow-punchers streamed from far parts into town.

One of the first to come was Judge John Bertram, Indian County's most prominent citizen and owner of its biggest spread, T Bar T. Bertram was a frosty-haired old-timer with a blunt manner and hair-trigger temper. His ruddy face glowed hotly as Steele told him about the bullet-pierced canteen.

"The sheriff calls it murder," added Shorty.

"By Godfrey!" boomed the judge. "It's a vicious violation o' the desert water code, that's sure. But malicious mischief about covers it, legally speakin'."

"Suppose I establish some connection between the dead man and the culprit who fired the shot, Judge?"

Bertram rubbed his stubby jowl judiciously.

"As much as I'd like tuh make things hot for the rascal, I don't think that's possible, Sheriff."

As he uttered his opinion, Bertram gazed down on the dead man's face.

It was a seamy, weathered countenance, fringed with graying whiskers. Emaciated by thirst and unknown hardships, the cheek bones were prominent, the nose thin and pinched. Deep sun wrinkles at the corners of faded blue eyes were the marks of a man long accustomed to desert glare. Even in death, the face had the deep tan of old leather.

"Typical ol' desert rat," Bertram observed. "I've seen plenty like him. But never this particular specimen before. Know anything about him?"

"Not yet, Judge," Steele answered. "Except that he evidently was just up out of Mexico, and about broke. Also an inoffensive sort."

"How yuh know that?"

"He had no weapon of any kind, nothing but a short sheath knife on his belt."

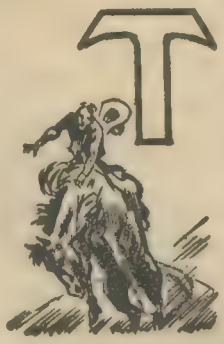
"No gun? Thunderation, he took long chances pokin' around down yonder in the Yaqui country minus any sign of a firearm!"

Steele's hand went to his tobacco pocket. But he wasn't reaching for makings. There was something in there besides tobacco sack and brown papers. The sheriff was on the point of revealing that "something", even started a low-voiced explanation to Bertram, when the batwing doors parted and a knot of new arrivals surged into Thimble Jack's place.

Whatever Steele had intended to say was drowned in a noisy exchange of greeting and questions. His hand dropped from the flap pocket of his calfskin vest, to hook a thumb over his *buscadero* gunbelt, weighted with the twin Colts that he always wore.

CHAPTER II

N. O. Goodbody



THROUGH the evening, Borderland dwellers came and went. The man known as Wake-up Riley gained more widespread attention in death than he had in life. But nobody professed to know him, or had heard his name.

"Seems tuh me, Sheriff," said Judge Bertram, as the saloon crowd dwindled to a few stragglers, "that yuh're givin' this dehydrated ol' geezer undue prominence."

"I agree with John," stated Doc Crabtree. "Fact is, I told Dictionary couple hours back to dig a hole in our small but flourishing boothill cemetery. Might be, John, you'd like to stay over till morning, so as to speak a few simple words of respect to the deceased."

"I'll do that," Bertram agreed solemnly. "How about a round or two o' pinochle before we turn in?"

Steele and Shorty withdrew then, trudging up the loose-planked sidewalk to the jail office, where they slept. As Steele struck a sulphur match and lifted it to the wick of the reflector wall lamp above his desk, the little deputy squatted on his canvas cot and wrested off his boots. He stretched out, fingers locked behind his head, one leg cocked over the other, drowsily wiggling his toes.

"The judge ain't the only one that's wonderin' why yuh made such a to-do over a death where there ain't no downright, provable crime involved, Sheriff," he drawled.

"That so?" breathed Steele, as he

reached for a goodnight cigarette. "Who else?"

"Me, for one."

Steele said nothing as he twisted a brown paper around dry tobacco crumbs.

"I been wonderin' about sumthin' else," Shorty went on. "First part of this evenin', seemed like you was about tuh tell the judge sumthin' confidential—when them yahoos tromped in and interrupted."

"Good leather, *segundo,*" Steele drawled approvingly. "Glad to know you keep your ears and eyes open."

"Reckon I don't miss much," said Shorty, with smug self-approval. "I'm developin' a first-class power o' observation, I am!"

A thin smile flicked the sheriff's lips as he licked his quirly shut.

"Just one important thing you missed."

Shorty raised his head.

"What, when an' where?" he demanded.

"When I came onto Wakeup Riley's body, first thing I did was to go through his pockets."

Shorty came up on an elbow.

"I got a peculiar felin' that yuh're about tuh spring a surprise on me, Sheriff. Let's have it."

Steele fingered his vest pocket. Two small articles dropped onto Shorty's cot, beside him. He picked them up, staring.

"Migosh, *two* Winchester empties!" he gusted. "Yuh let on as how yuh found only one!"

Steele struck a match under the edge of his flat-topped desk.

"One in the sand," he said, "the other on the dead man. Take a look at the firing-pin marks on the primers, *segundo.*"

Shorty blinked wonderingly at them.

"Glory be, they're exactly the same! Plumb identical!"

"Proving that Wakeup Riley must have had some previous connection with whoever shot that canteen. In which case, the act was committed with malice aforethought. And that means—"

"Murder!" blurted the amazed little deputy.

WAKEUP RILEY was soon forgotten. By all except Blue Steele, anyhow. As for the sheriff, he was soon plunged into activities that turned his inquiring mind into new channels.

It all started when a rancher rode excitedly up to the jail office one morning and rushed inside.

"When I came to this confounded country, I was told that it was the safest and most law-abiding section in the Territory!" he raged. "Folks claimed that the best sheriff in the Southwest had cleaned up Indian County and rid these parts of undesirables, permanent!"

N. O. Goodbody was not an old-timer around Painted Post. He had arrived only a few months before and bought the old Griggs spread on the lower Caliente. He was a broad-faced, easy-going man with a ready smile and a good humor that made him generally liked.

He accepted, without protest, the twisted version of his name that was wished onto him. He was called as "No-Good Nobody," a laughing allusion to his inexperience with desert stock-raising.

He cheerfully admitted that inexperience, so that Judge Bertram and others took pleasure in giving him neighborly advice and assistance.

No-Good Nobody wasn't a poor man. He had outside means of some sort that supported his ranching venture, and by upgrading the Griggs' range scrubs with some shipped-in Shorthorns, seemed on his way to making a go of things—if his money held out.

This was the first occasion that Steele had seen the man out of sorts. The outburst took him by surprise.

"What's the rub, No-Good?" he demanded.

"I'm shy six head of expensive registered cattle! Rustled during the night some time, from close-in, fenced pasture!"

Worry shadowed Steele's lean, bronzed face.

"That's bad. Sounds as though Border raiders are at work again."

"What makes you so sure it was somebody from the Border?"

Steele shrugged one shoulder.

"I don't claim that Mexicans are worse or better than anybody else. But I might as well tell you that, hugging the boundary as it does, has always been a drawback to Griggs' old range."

"Why?" Goodbody demanded.

"It isn't easy for American lawmen to run down rustlers across the Line. Or vice versa."

"You trying to tell me you don't aim to do anything about it?" blazed the other.

Steele never wasted words when actions spoke louder. His reply was to reach for his gunbelt and Colts, hanging on a set of antlers in back of his desk.

Shorty grabbed his hat and bolted outside for the corral.

"I'll saddle up, Sheriff," he called back over a shoulder, "though like as not No-Good's prize Shorthorns only strayed."

"Stray cattle," Goodbody told Steele testily, "don't cut a barbed-wire fence!"

"They leave tracks, N. G."

"Tracking isn't in my line."

"Now that you mention it, just what was your line of endeavor, before you hit Painted Post?"

"What's that got to do with my stolen cows?" Goodbody fired back at him.

The sheriff shrugged off the ungracious retort, and at that Goodbody simmered down a little.

"I didn't set out to be cantankerous," he apologized. "It's just that—"

"It's the heat, I reckon. *Muy calado*, eh?"

"*Si, absolutemente*," was the prompt rejoinder.

"You pick up Border lingo fast, N. G."

Goodbody forced a short laugh.

"Foreign palaver comes easy to me, always did. Can even jabber some Chinese. Let's scoot over to Chow Now's for a cup of coffee before we head for my place, and I'll prove it."

By the time Shorty was ready with the steel-dust gelding and the pinto, Goodbody was in an amiable mood. It was an hour and a half by trail, across the lava-capped Caliente Hills, to the old Griggs spread, now the scene of Goodbody's venture.

The ranch premises occupied a bench that dropped away to the river bottomlands. Part of the bench was a grassy fenced-in pasture, containing a few head of cattle bunched in the sparse shade of a row of poplars.

"The fence break is over by those trees," said Goodbody, pointing. "The marauders came sometime during last night."

"Why'd they make off with only six head, when they could o' cleaned out every critter in there?" asked Shorty.

"I'm no expert on the habits of cattle thieves," said Goodbody. "It may be they intend to clean me out piecemeal, a few head at a time."

STEELE reined to a gate, opened and entered it and rode to the cut wire, which had been loosely repaired. In so doing, Goodbody had trampled the ground in the immediate vicinity, obliterating whatever telltale sign the rustlers might have left.

He ranged out farther then, in a circling search, as he had on the night when he found the empty cartridge by the water hole. He found hoofprints aplenty. But they crisscrossed in all directions, furnishing no evidence as to the direction the stolen cows had been driven.

He returned to Goodbody, who watched from the shade of the poplars.

"Not much to go on, N.G.," he said. "Not enough even to show how many rustlers honored you with a visit."

"From now on, I sleep with one eye and both ears open, you can bet on that!" Goodbody growled. "Well, might as well call things off for the present. Let's go up to my diggings."

The ranchhouse, disorderly and run-down, was a cheerless abode as Steele remembered. But he was still in quest of a certain Winchester. So he embraced the opportunity to size up Goodbody's arsenal. On wall pegs near the door he spotted a rifle. It was dusty from long disuse. Moreover, it was a .25-36 Marlin, which .30-30 loads wouldn't fit.

"This the extent o' your shootin' tools?" he inquired off-handedly of Goodbody.

Steele turned to Shorty.

"*Segundo*, how about you luggin' your soogans down here and putting up with N.G. for a few nights?"

The little deputy, with an eye to the littered and uninviting house, was unenthused by the suggestion, so that he couldn't conceal his relief when Goodbody promptly protested:

"That's no go, Sheriff, thanks all the same. I don't want it to be said that N.G. Goodbody needs special protection. I'll take my chances alone, same as I have been doin'. Except in busy seasons, when the Robles outfit sends over a buckaroo or two to help out."

So Steele and Shorty back-trailed for town. Their route passed through a low

dip in the Caliente Hills, and as they moved up the long ascent the sheriff's trailwise eyes were busy. All at once he halted, his eyes holding a sharp interest in old hoofprints that slanted to the left into a steep, brushy draw.

"*Segundo,*" he said musingly, "if you aimed to keep tabs on the country hereabouts, for some special purpose, how would you go about it?"

Shorty blinked at the curious question. Then glibly:

"Why, I'd billygoat tuh the top o' Centinela Hill yonder, Sheriff. A man kin see for miles in all directions from there. If I was a rustler, waitin' for a chance tuh crack down on No-Good's cows, that's what I'd do."

Steele promptly reined the gelding from the trail.

"C'mon, then. Let's us make a looksee."

"Migosh!" croaked the little deputy. "Why can't I learn tuh keep my big bazoo buttoned up!"

Steele gave him a grimacing smile.

"It'll be some cooler up on top," he flung back.

Shorty fumed until they reached the breeze-swept crest. There, in a thin strip of shade beside a pinnacle of volcanic rock, the two of them eased from leather to scan the broad vista of desert. They could see from the river to Frying Pan Sink and beyond. But the empty spaces to the south were unmarred by any movement or trace of dust to denote a living presence.

"If No-Good had hurried up here this mornin', instead o' tailin' intuh town for us, he might o' got some trace of his Shorthorns," said Shorty. "Too late now, though."

Squatting, Steele meditatively rolled a smoke. His slitted eyes were busy beyond the twist of brown paper. Dim on the windblown ground around him were signs of another's recent presence. Old hoofprints, such as he had seen at the turnoff on the trail, showed that the Centinela summit had been visited not once, but repeatedly.

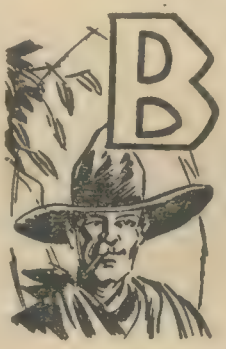
Hoofprints were identifiable, like human fingerprints. But not on hard, windblown ground like this. The impressions were so faint and so few that they escaped Shorty's notice. Anyway, he was looking longingly towards Painted Post, wishing that their journey in the blazing heat of noontime was finished.

Finally Steele rose languidly to his feet, stretched his lean, hard length and remounted. They descended a long hogback on the western slope of the hills until they came onto the old Griggs trail again.

Sparing the horses, they jogged on towards the shimmering distortion of ramshackle buildings that were the raw little cowtown that they called home.

CHAPTER III

.30-30 Empties



BACK at the corral, as Shorty unsaddled, the Wakeup Riley burro roused from a doze in the shade of a brush-roofed ramada and ambled over to him for the usual friendly word and pat.

The little animal was as tame as a dog. It had come to be the corral pet. Well-fed and content, it had indeed fallen into kind hands. Nobody worked it except Dictionary, and then only on easy jaunts to the river thickets to drag in stovewood for Chow Now's kitchen.

Life resumed its lazy, eventless routine, except for a drenching thunderstorm, which allayed the heat and left some runoff in rocky depressions of the thirsting desert range. Then came another morning when N.G. Goodbody reappeared in town.

Steele and Shorty both sensed portentous news as the man swaggered into the jail office. There was some indefinable change in the roly-poly, easygoing man. Even his voice had a new ring as he sang out triumphantly:

"Well boys, I've taken justice in my own hands!"

Steele's granite-hard eyes probed the other's flushed, elated face.

"Let's have it, N.G.," he demanded.

Goodbody flung a leg jauntily across a corner of the sheriff's desk.

"Along about daylight this A. M., I was roused by a small commotion. Spotted a hombre making a sneak along that patched place in my fence. I gave him a warning

yell from my front porch."

"Then what?" Shorty demanded.

"He took a quick shot at me. I fired back. We swapped lead only once."

"Did yuh knock feathers out o' the owl-hooter with that Marlin peashooter?" jibed Shorty.

Savage satisfaction shone on the rancher's face.

"It's been so long since you famous manhunters have seen a dead outlaw, that you've probably forgot what one looks like." He waggled a thumb over one shoulder. "Such being the case, I've furnished you with an opportunity to refresh your memories."

Three long strides took Steele to the doorway. At the jail hitch-rail stood a runty buckskin. Draped across the saddle, roped there like a game trophy, was a dead man.

Shorty untied the rope that bound the corpse by neck and ankles and laid it on the platform sidewalk in front of the jail.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Young Mexicano, hardly more'n a kid." The worn, faded shirt was grewsomely blood-soaked. "Shot clean through, close to the heart, I'd say."

"That Marlin," said Goodbody, "is a real nice little gun."

"Is that the lad's gun there in the saddle-boot?" Steele asked.

Goodbody nodded smugly.

"You mentioned swapping lead with him," Steele added.

"And so I did, Sheriff. I put it there after he dropped it. He didn't have a chance to lever in a fresh load after his one crack at me. I got him, quick, sudden and final!"

Steele had the gun in his hands now. It was a Winchester carbine. He opened the action, shucking out an empty casing.

"Any idea who he is?" he inquired.

"What's the odds?" Goodbody said callously. "He's the rascal that stole my cattle and came back for more."

Steele knelt and explored the dead youth's pockets. He didn't expect the threadbare, cheap clothing to yield much. It didn't. A Mexican half-dollar, a broken-bladed knife, a block of sulphur matches and a small leather pouch containing remnants of dry saddle rations—pinole and jerky.

Only those, and apart from them in the right front pants pocket a half-dozen .30-30 cartridges. Steele turned the pocket wrongside out and studied the lining. He handed the cartridges to Shorty with a terse:

"Drop 'em in your levis, *segundo*."

SUSPENDED around the neck was a blood-splashed emblem of religious faith on a silver chain.

Steele lifted his eyes to Goodbody.

"Doesn't it strike you as odd," he drawled quietly, "that he didn't pack wire cutters?"

Goodbody's gloating self-satisfaction was shaken only for an instant. He went to the saddle-bags on his own horse.

"Here's the cutters. The tool of his trade."

"But yuh let on as how yuh didn't search him, No-Good," piped Shorty.

"I didn't. He dropped these where he dropped his gun. Also his sombrero fell off when he went down. There it is, on my saddle-horn."

Steele examined the soiled, slabby felt sombrero. The initials, "A.G", burned on the inner band furnished the only clue to the dead youth's identity.

"The rest," he said tersely, "is up to Doc Crabtree."

"That all you've got to say, Sheriff?" There was a trace of injury in Goodbody's voice. "Ain't I due some congratulations?"

"If you hanker to bask in the glory of a killing, why don't you stay over in town this evening?"

"That's exactly what I intend to do! I bet Judge Bertram and others will thank me for this good riddance!"

"Don't crow too loud, No-Good," grunted Shorty, annoyed by the other's conceit. "A fast tongue calls for a fast trigger in this country!"

"I'm not so slow," smirked Goodbody. "Sorry yuh're sore, you boys, because I stole your thunder."

It was plain enough that he was getting under the little deputy's skin, not by what he had done but by rejoicing openly. It was Steele's code, and Shorty's, too, to regard death by violence with decent regret. Life was a sacred thing, the taking of it a solemn responsibility.

In all their career as lawmen, they never had taken life wantonly. Killing was a last extremity, only to avoid being killed.

But it was hopeless to make Goodbody understand this distinction.

"C'mon, No-Good, let's corral the buckskin," Shorty said.

"And still the law needs my help, eh?" the other chuckled mockingly. "Okay, so be it."

When the two of them reached the corral and Shorty lowered the gate bars, the docile little burro advanced to greet them. But as they entered, its mood changed suddenly. Ears flattened, it wheeled and bounded out of reach beyond the feed rack. Shorty tilted back his hat and scratched his brick-colored thatch wonderingly.

"Now that's queer," he muttered. "What's got intuh that little jack all of a sudden?"

"Spooked by blood scent, that's all," said Goodbody.

He unsaddled and freed the buckskin and his own mount, then sojourned down to Thimble Jack's. When Shorty returned to the jail office, the body had been removed. Steele was in his desk chair, studying an array of fired rifle cartridges. There were three of them now, Shorty noted.

"Collectin' empties, Sheriff?" he chirped.

"One of these," Steele mused, "we found that night at the water hole. The other, Wakeup Riley had on him."

"How about this third one."

"It was in the Winchester on the buckskin."

"The shot the Mexican fired at No-Good, huh? Yuh know, Sheriff, I'm losin' my fondness for No-Good. His attitude in this here affair is plumb obnoxious!"

"Even a toy poodle is apt to growl at its first taste of raw meat, *segundo*," Steele smiled thinly.

"He's got sumthin' tuh yap about, all right enough. Trouble is, when the crowd hits town tonight he'll make us look like a pair of knotheads."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that."

"I do though, by gravy! It's more than my sinful pride that's been injured. It's our reputations—yours mainly—that he'll damage. I don't think yuh ought tuh've encouraged him tuh lay over in town and make big talk."

Pacing fretfully, Shorty jabbed both hands deep in his levi pockets. In so doing, his touch encountered the Winchester loads. He had almost forgotten the six cartridges that Steele had taken from the Mexican youth's pocket and handed to him. He went to lay them on the desk. Steele lifted a restraining hand.

"Hang onto 'em, *segundo*."

"Pack 'em around, yuh mean? Till when, Sheriff?"

"Produce 'em down at the bar tonight. When Doc Crabtree holds inquest."

"If you say so, all right. Only it'll make No-Good look all the bigger," Shorty lamented. "It'll show that the Mexican kid came loaded down for trouble."

THE DAY wore to a close, and in the cool of the evening folks from far-flung parts of Indian County drifted townward. For it was the month's end, payday on the ranches, and Thimble Jack's place attracted a convivial throng.

"Migosh, what an occasion for No-Good tuh do his war dance!" grumbled Shorty, as he and Steele started for the crowded saloon.

"It's the opportunity he hung around all day waiting for," Steele said imperturbably.

"Well, I just hope I don't fly off the handle and pop him one on the snoot!"

"That wouldn't help matters any, *segundo*. Keep your shirt on."

When they entered Goodbody, flushed and talkative, stood at the middle of the bar, the center of an attentive group. In a far corner, propped across two chairs, where the remains of Wakeup Riley had been displayed not many nights before, was a board coffin containing the slight body of the Mexican youth. Beside the coffin lay the Winchester carbine.

"He was a bloodthirsty sidewinder," Goodbody was telling his audience. "And snake-quick on the draw! But I was all set for him. Time and again, since the first raid, I had dry-aimed between my porch and that fence line. Had my sights set right. I never was one to go at things willy-nilly, but plan in advance."

He paused on seeing Steele and Shorty.

"Hullo, here's the majesty o' the law!" he jeered.

Across the smoke-filled place, Steele caught Doc Crabtree's eye. Doc was chewing a cold cheroot in evident irritation. Steele said:

"Suppose you go over the whole thing again, N.G. Just as a matter of official routine."

"Glad to," Goodbody said.

Doc Crabtree made a weary gesture toward the body of the slain youth.

"No way out of it, I guess, this being a coroner's hearing. Though a verdict of justifiable homicide seems pretty well established in advance. Go ahead, Goodbody."

Exulting in his prominence, Goodbody needed no persuading. He primed himself with a quick drink and started.

"As I've said, I'm a peaceful, law-abiding citizen and taxpayer that suffered depredations at the hands of a thievin' miscreant. The duly-constituted authorities wasn't on the job, so I was forced to take the law into my own hands and—"

"Not so windy," Doc Crabtree ordered brusquely. "Just give us the plain facts. The deceased met his death by a gunshot wound. You fired that shot—yes or no."

"After he fired at me, yes!"

"Go on from there."

Goodbody proceeded with a detailed account. When he finished, Doc asked Steele:

"Got anything to add to that, Sheriff?"

The crowd was tiring of the story that Goodbody had repeated for each new arrival. But Steele's keen-edged "yes" gripped them with new interest, for as he said it he commanded their attention with three .30-30 empties he had drawn from his vest pocket.

"Here is evidence," he announced, "to prove that the Winchester there by the body is the same gun that caused the death of Wakeup Riley. Firing-pin marks show that it was used to shoot the canteen at Frying Pan water hole."

There was an immediate sensation. Somebody whooped congratulations at Goodbody. Somebody else walloped him on the back. It was a jolt for Shorty. His freckle-spattered face paled, then reddened. Why in all get-out had the sheriff made a double-barreled hero out of the vain and strutting Goodbody?

He was mad clear through and about to blow up, when he felt Steele's warning touch on his arm. Then, in an undertone barely audible in the hubbub of excitement, he heard the sheriff say:

"Steady, *segundo!* It isn't over yet!"

CHAPTER IV

Conflicting Facts

AS THE babble subsided, Shorty was aware of a glint of purpose in Steele's rock-hard eyes. They didn't waver from Goodbody's broad, beaming face. Leaning composedly at the end of the bar, the sheriff's manner was calm, his voice an unhurried drawl as he spoke again:

"I hope N.G. doesn't mind a few questions to clear up that water-hole mystery he's solved for us."

"Fire away, Steele," gabbled Goodbody. "Anything you want to know, just ask me."

"When you first sighted the young hombre, he was at the spot where the fence had been cut before, is that right?"

"That's what. You heard me right."

"Wire cutters in one hand, gun in the other?"

"What I said was, he dropped 'em both where I downed him."

"Did he drop the cutters before he shot at you, or after you shot him?"

"What does that matter?" Goodbody retorted.

"I don't quite get the drift of your inquiry myself, Sheriff," Doc Crabtree said. "I don't see what it's got to do with the water-hole atrocity."

"It was barely daylight," Goodbody said. "How could I see every move he made?"

"You saw well enough to put a bullet through him, N.G.," Steele said.

"Say, now, what're you drivin' at? Are you hintin' that I wasn't justified in shootin' back at him? Ought I have gone down to him with a polite good morning and asked what he was after?"

The crowd chimed in with Goodbody's objections. All the sympathy was with him.

"He held the gun to his shoulder, didn't he?" Steele persisted mildly.

"Where else would he hold it?"

"And you let him have it before he could lever in another load?"

"You bet I did! You want that I should o' let him blaze away until he hit me?"

Steele flicked a look at the perplexed Doc Crabtree.

"Doc, tell us what course the bullet took in the body of N.G.'s rustler."

"It entered the chest, square through the sternum or breastbone, passing through the body in the region of the heart."

"You mind picking up that Winchester, Doc? Stand over there by the coffin and aim it at me."

Crabtree briskly complied.

"Now, N.G.," Steele continued in that calm, relentless drawl, more telling than a shouted accusation, "explain how you could have hit a man in the manner described, when he was in a shooting position, his left side turned your direction."

There was sudden, deadly silence. In the hush, all eyes were riveted on Goodbody.

"I'm still sort of mixed up about the wire cutters, too," Steele added. "He wouldn't have let 'em dangle from his left hand. That would ruin his aim. Seems just as unlikely for him to hold the cutters in his right hand in using a lever-action Winchester."

Goodbody found his voice again.

"Blast your mean hide, this is just a dirty scheme to mix me up, Steele! Trying to get even because I done what you failed to do, and that your paid duty!"

Judge John Bertram was among those present. Thus far, he had managed to take no part in proceedings. But now he barged forward and took the gun from Crabtree.

"Now let's size up this situation reasonable," he boomed out. "In the flury of a gunfight, a man doesn't always remember exactly how things happened. Suppose it was like this."

Placing the gun briefly to his shoulder, he lowered the butt and tilted the barrel upward, in position to lever an empty out, a fresh load in from the magazine.

"There! You see, Sheriff?" he said. "If Goodbody shot at this interval, his bullet would naturally o' hit the crook square on!"

THE DEMONSTRATION brought yells of approval from the crowd—and dark scowls for Steele. Emboldened by the judge's defense, Goodbody sneered:

"Any more underhanded tricks up your sleeve, Steele?"

Shorty flung an anxious side glance at the sheriff. He seemed strangely unmoved by the general feeling against him.

"Your memory not being too reliable, N.G., let's turn to what the judge would call physicial evidence," Steele said. "*Segundo*, get over there by Doc, where everybody can see you. Shuck those six Winchester loads out of your pocket."

Baffled by the tangle of events, and not knowing where they would lead, the little deputy obeyed.

"Now turn that pocket wrong side out," Steele requested.

Shorty did what the sheriff asked.

"Look at the pocket lining, N.G.," Steele pointed out. "It's blackened from the soft-nosed bullets, isn't it?"

Goodbody gaped, but he gave no reply.

"That," Steele explained, "is because the *segundo* has packed 'em around for six-seven hours. Your rustler packed 'em a heap longer, N.G. That is, if he made a long night ride to your place, as you've led us to suppose."

Goodbody was breathing hard. But still he said nothing.

"Now, Doc," Steele continued, "show us the lining of the dead man's pocket, the right one, where we found those cartridges."

With eager willingness, Crabtree pulled out the pocket lining.

"Nary a bullet smudge on it!" he reported.

"There's the physical evidence, proving that he didn't carry those Winchester loads in his pocket!" Steele said with finality.

"Provin' what?" boomed Bertram.

"Proving that they were put there after he was shot. . . How about it, N.G.? How's your memory on that subject?"

The crowd was stunned by this wholly unexpected turn of events. With a swift change of sentiment, all eyes went to Goodbody now in uncertainty and dawning suspicion. The implication behind Steele's casually uttered words was as damning as though the dead had risen to point an accusing finger. Had Goodbody framed the killing? If so, here and now, before all men, he had set the stage for his own undoing.

"Thunderation, Sheriff!" exploded Judge Bertram. "Those are mighty serious insinuations! They rest on awful thin

proof. Where did the cartridges come from? Tell us that!"

"They're marked, Judge—with knife scratches on the base of them. I made those marks."

"When?" Bertram said quickly.

"Suppose I did it that morning when the *segundo* and I rode to Goodbody's spread with him, and found the loads in his possession?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Wouldn't it strike you as odd that Goodbody would have thirty-thirty loads and a twenty-five thirty-six gun?"

That was the climax. Bertram's objections were at an end. His eyes flashed to the pale, shaken man gripping the bar.

"I've stood up for you, Goodbody, in all fairness and in hopes that the sheriff was on the wrong track. I still hope so. If he's wrong, prove it. It's up to you to make talk now, straight talk."

Goodbody flung a wild look at the faces around him. There wasn't a flicker of response in any of them. He glanced at Steele and Shorty. The sheriff's face was a mask that hid his thoughts. But licks of fire leaped from the little deputy's eyes.

"Yuh're a cowardly killer, No-Good!" He spat out the words as if they were something bad-tasting. "Not only that, yuh're a cheap showoff and a bald-faced liar! There was never any proof tuh start with that yuh lost any cattle! What's yore game? Just what was yuh up to?"

Goodbody squirmed under the tongue-lashing. The flush had seeped from his face, leaving it pasty and sweat-beaded.

"All right, Goodbody, let's hear what you've got to say!" urged Bertram.

The other's tongue darted to his dry lips as he sucked in a deep breath.

"Only this!" he grated finally. "Why should I kill anybody without purpose or motive? That's it. Motive! What motive, other than I gave, could I have? Explain that, somebody! You explain it, Steele, since you claim to know everything else!"

The sheriff had no ready answer to the challenge. A wall clock noisily ticked away suspense-heavy seconds. A new uncertainty spread through the crowd.

The thick silence was shattered by a shrill yelp from Shorty. Why he should think of such a small matter at this moment, he never could have said. Perhaps it was pure inspiration. Anyhow, remembrance swept upon him of the little burro's scurrying retreat when Goodbody entered the corral.

"I've got it!" cried the little deputy. "Yuh had a motive, good an' plenty, No-Good. Just tell us this—when an' where did yuh know Wakeup Riley?"

AN EMOTIONAL explosion was touched off by Shorty's question. At the utterance of that name, almost forgotten in Painted Post, N.O. Goodbody went berserk. He made a frantic plunge at the man nearest to him, a Circle 7 puncher who wore an open-holstered six-gun.

Snatching the weapon, Goodbody brandished it with a crazed yell. In the milling turmoil, he forced an opening through which he plunged to the door of the back room. He kicked it open and stood there in the opening like a trapped, fear-crazed animal. Between him and the sheriff, the crowd formed a barrier of protection.

"Follow me, Steele, and you'll get it same as others got it!" he screeched. "I'll be out of the law's reach by tomorrow, and for all the tomorrow's to come! I leave the rest of you to fight like coyotes over what I leave on the old Griggs place! *Adios* from Goodbody to everybody!"

With that, he stepped back and slammed the door. Now, for the first time, he became aware that the back room was lighted and contained, besides a jumble of stored supplies, another's presence.

Seated on an upturned whisky keg, lighted lantern beside him, Dictionary Smith was—or had been—busy with paint pot and brush.

In his earlier, footloose days before he settled down in Painted Post, the shy, solitary little handyman had been a wandering sign painter, known in the vernacular of the trade as a "barn-dauber".

He still was fond of daubing, and his art lately had come into use. He had painted Wakeup Riley's headboard. He had just finished a fancy job of shaded lettering, "A.G.", on a wooden cross to adorn the grave of the unnamed Mexican youth. While he still had his hand in it, he was painting a sign for Chow Now's eating place that said, "RESTAURANT."

He had filled in the first four letters—REST—when Goodbody flung himself into the back room. Dictionary dreaded and avoided anything that smacked of violence.

That was one reason that drew him into the seclusion of the back room, to spare himself Goodbody's gory account.

But trouble had sought him out, after all. Here was Goodbody fanging a six-gun at him. As Goodbody advanced, making for the rear exit, Dictionary hopped up. He had not the slightest intention of resistance. He merely intended to get well out of the way.

Goodbody snarled a curse and struck. The impact of the gun barrel against the side of his head sent Dictionary down in a senseless heap. Goodbody gave the lantern a shattering kick and rushed out into the night.

Steele, elbowing through the panicky crowd, dashed into the back room. Oil spilled from the broken lantern had saturated Dictionary. His clothing had lighted like a wick. Steele sprang for a pile of burlap bags and flung them on the stunned, limp figure.

He buried Dictionary in them, hurling his own weight on top, and thus smothered the flames that in a few seconds would have become a funeral pyre.

This took precious seconds. When he finished, the commotion in front told him that the saloon crowd was stampeding out into the street. He had hoped, by prompt pursuit, to avoid this. The night was pitch-dark, it being dark of the moon, and in the general excitement anyone could be mistaken for the fugitive. Pursuers would shoot at each other. The situation increased Goodbody's chances for escape, besides endangering everybody else.

CHAPTER V

Rest for the Wicked

STEELE knew that he was taking dangerous chances as he dashed outside and around the building. A shot stabbed out and splinters from the side of the saloon whizzed past his face. He shouted a warning.

There was yelling bedlam out in front, by the hitchrack. Men were piling to leather, spurting off in all directions. Where was Goodbody?

Shorty popped up alongside Steele.

"No-Good didn't show up at the saloon hitchrack, Sheriff!" he panted.

"Then vamoose for the corral!" crackled Steele, taking off faster than Shorty could follow.

They rejoined at the corral gate. The gate bars were down. Dust hung in the air. Never did the two of them get saddled and going faster. They streaked south. The steel-dust gelding and the pinto put town behind them before the confused search of the crowd reached the corral.

Beyond the law's reach, Goodbody had said. That meant the Border. Mexico. Steele and Shorty spurred for Hourglass Canyon and the Frying Pan. It was to their advantage that their horses knew every dip and thicket and rock obstruction in that dash through the dark.

Finally, through the black abyss of the canyon, they emerged onto the alluvial fan that dropped to the desert sink.

The horses pounded on toward the dry water hole.

"We kin set fire tuh that mesquite thicket!" chattered Shorty. "By the light of it, we kin tell if No-Good has gone past! If he has, our chances are slim of ever layin' eyes on him agin!"

The sound of their coming was borne to the thorny clump where Wakeup Riley had breathed his last. Since then, the lawmen had hung another filled canteen there, for any distressed wayfarer who might have urgent need of water.

As the sound of hoofs came to him, Goodbody reined his blown horse up beside the mesquite, was in the act of reaching for the suspended canteen. Ahead, he knew, was a long, dry trail.

The pressing pursuit drove him into a frenzy of desperation. Holding the canteen by its web strap, he gripped the six-gun and cocked it. He sat rigidly motionless, horse and man a part of the thick-shadowed background. He lifted the gun to a trembling aim as Steele, in the lead, bore down on him.

At the crashing rear of the six-gun, the gelding leaped and turned and Steele felt the whip of a bullet passing through his flapping vest front. Goodbody's trigger finger tightened for a second try when a Colt drummed doom.

Goodbody jerked like a puppet, then sagged forward as though bowing in defeat. Under the withering hail of lead, he lurched from saddle. He was making death sounds as Steele came to him. The bullet-pierced canteen gurgled, too, as the thirsty sand drank it along with Goodbody's blood.

Steele knelt and thrust it, fast emptying, under the dying man's head.

"You made an easy target of yourself, N.G., holding a white, canvas-covered canteen. Strange how things work out, isn't it?"

Shorty hurried over to them.

"Let's start where we left off, back yonder at Thimble Jack's!" he gusted. "Where an' how was you and Wakeup Riley mixed up?"

Goodbody gathered his waning strength for a last effort.

"Mexico!" he wheezed. "Mine pardners! We hit rich paydirt! I gunned at Wakeup one night, grabbed it and skipped! Settled on Griggs place to keep eye on Border!"

"Expected Riley to come after you, then?" asked Steele.

Goodbody twisted out a sickening grimace.

"Saw him coming from top of hills!"

"Then it was you that made Centinela a lookout?"

"Yes, yes! Went down, gunned canteen. Watched him die!"

"It was murder, then."

Goodbody's eyelids drooped, but he managed a faint nod.

"Had to throw you off track, after you found that blasted empty. Lured Mexican kid up from below on promise of buckaroo job. Gave him Winchester. Then . . . then shot him."

"I was pretty sure of that. Your holler about rustled cattle was just a part of that dodge, then?"

Another barely perceptible nod. His chest rose once more. Then his life went with a shuddering sigh and Goodbody lay inert, a part of the dust.

THE TWO lawmen stood motionless in the darkness for a moment.

"That's Goodbody for yuh," said Shorty, going for his lariat. "Now it's a rope finish, even if he didn't live tuh hang. Tell me something, Sheriff, that still has me guessin'. How did you come ontuh them thirty-thirty loads and get tuh mark 'em, like yuh said?"

Steele reached thoughtfully for a smoke and said:

"Ever hear of a game called poker, *segundo*? That was a bluff. Luckily, it worked. I've got a question, too."

"Shoot, Sheriff," said the little deputy as he set about loading the dead killer onto the pinto.

"How did you ever get onto Goodbody's connection with Wakeup Riley?"

"The little burro solved that mystery, sort of," Shorty answered. Mighty smart critters, burros are. It plumb detested No-Good, and showed it so plain that I figgered it had met up with him somewhere before."

"Good going, *segundo!*" praised Steele.

"I also was distrustful of No-Good, the more I seen of him."

"Smart work! It's the burro in you, suppose?"

"I'd be prouder o' donkey family connections than someothers," Shorty said.

When they reached Thimble Jack's place with the body, the pay-night crowd had thinned down. But Judge Bertram and some others lingered. And among those who waited up was Dictionary Smith.

The handyman had a bump on his head, but otherwise was undamaged and extremely thankful to be alive.

"When I came to, under that heap of sacks, I thought I was attendin' my own burial, Sheriff," he prattled. "When that turned out to be premature and erroneous, I knew right off who saved me."

"You're welcome, old-timer!"

"Also, I was sure you'd get your man, so I went ahead and fixed up a send-off into the hereafter for him. I'll show you."

He bustled into the back room and came out with the sign he had been working on when the fleeing fugitive had struck him down.

"I just switched over the Chow Now job," Dictionary explained, "into a nice, appropriate sentiment for the latest deceased."

Proudly he displayed his handiwork. It was a suitable finish to an unmourned sinner.

It was a grave marker that read:

REST FOR THE WICKED
N. O. Goodbody

Sherman pointed his fork at the restaurant owner. "You never said any such a thing, Pete. You said I was foolish!"

PIE FOR THE PRISONER

By CHARLES ALAN GREGORY

Earl Sherman scents trouble—and gets a culinary surprise!

EARL SHERMAN found it strange that he should feel uneasy as he sat there at the table in big Pete Gribble's restaurant. He had thought he would enjoy having dinner with Nancy Buckner, but that was before Mike Lewis joined them.

"Heard you weren't doin' so well with that spread of yours Earl," Mike Lewis said. He was a big, blustering sort of a man, and foreman of Ray Buckner's Diamond B ranch. "That yuh been havin' some tough goin'."

"I wouldn't say that." Nancy smiled at Sherman. "For an ex-cowboy who saved his money and started his own ranch just a year ago seems to me that Earl has done quite nicely."

"Lost some stock on account of the bad winter we just pulled through," Sherman said, a serious expression on his young, good-looking face. "But aside from that I'm getting along about as well as could be expected."

"That's my boy!" Pete Gribble stopped at the table, a tray in his hand, and a grin on his big face. "Little over a year ago when Earl told me he aimed to have a

ranch of his own, I told him it was a smart thing to do."

"You did not, Pete!" Sherman pointed his fork at the owner of the one eating place in the little cowtown. "You said I was foolish, that I knew nothing about running a ranch, that I would probably go broke."

"I did?" Gribble looked surprised. "Funny, I don't remember that at all."

"You wouldn't," said Lewis. "You probably don't even remember that yesterday was Wednesday."

"As a matter of fact yesterday was Monday," said Nancy sweetly, running her fingers through her dark hair. "I'm afraid your memory isn't very good either, Mike."

Pete Gribble chuckled and waddled away. He was a friendly soul who was always willing to bet on what looked like a sure thing. The winner of a horse race or a poker game would always find Gribble around, and the big man whould always say, "That's my boy" as an indication he had been rooting for the winner from the first.

"Heard that yore final payment on yore ranch is due the bank this week, Earl," Lewis said. "Think you'll be able to pay it?"

"That's my business, isn't it Mike?" snapped Sherman.

HE DIDN'T like the foreman's attitude. In the first place Sherman had met Nancy in town and asked her to have dinner with him. She had accepted, and as they were eating, Mike Lewis had entered the restaurant, seen them there, and joined them without even being invited.

Since then, while the foreman's conversation had apparently been friendly enough, everything he said was obviously intended to place Earl Sherman in a bad light in the eyes of the girl.

"No need gettin' proddy, Earl," Lewis said quickly. "I was just askin, to be friendly. Tell you what, I've got five hundred dollars saved up. Be glad to lend you the money until things get breaking better for you."

"Why, thanks, Mike." Sherman stared at the big man in surprise. The foreman's offer was surprising. They never had been particularly good friends. "I'm shore grateful for the offer. I'll remember it if I get in a pinch."

"You do that, Earl." Lewis finished his coffee and rose from the table. "Always carry the cash right with me." He slapped the bulge beneath his shirt, that could have been made by a money-belt. "So if you get into a tight pinch just ask for the dinero."

He smiled at Nancy, paid Gribble for his meal and left the restaurant. When they were alone at the table, the girl looked at Sherman, an expression of surprise on her pretty face.

"Now I've heard everything," Nancy said. "Mike Lewis offering to lend you money, Earl. That doesn't seem like him at all."

"It shore doesn't," Sherman said. "And I'm wondering why he made that offer, Nancy."

Nancy was spending the night with her aunt who was the wife of the owner of the general store and lived in town. After they had finished their meal, Nancy and Sherman walked down the street to the store. Sheriff Ed Cooper was sitting on a bench in front of his office and he spoke to them as they passed.

"Howdy, folks," the old sheriff said. "Shore is a pretty night what with them stars and all."

"It certainly is just that," said Nancy. "Mesquite seems very quiet tonight, Sheriff."

"Haven't had much trouble lately," said Cooper. "And that suits me fine." He waved to the adobe building behind him. "Haven't got a prisoner in the jail."

Nancy laughed. Sherman found the uneasiness that had been with him at dinner still lingered as they walked on. He left Nancy at her aunt's house without saying any of the things he had planned to say to her tonight. He had intended to ask her to marry him, but something prevented him from voicing the words.

He got his horse, and left town, heading for his ranch five miles south of Mesquite. The feeling of impending danger was still strong within him, and yet nothing happened. He encountered no one along the road, and when he reached the Bar S everything seemed just about as he had left it.

He unsaddled and turned the roan into the corral with the rest of the horses. The two cowboys he had hired in town had

agreed to show up in the morning. Then he could start gathering his cattle for the spring roundup.

The stars were bright in the sky as he walked to the ranchhouse he had built with his own hands. Nancy had helped him select the furnishings of the house. She had shown so much interest that he could not help feeling she might like to live there—as his bride.

The front door was standing open. It puzzled him, for he was sure he had closed it before he had ridden into town that day. The feeling of danger was so strong that his hand was on the butt of the gun in his holster as he stepped in through the open doorway.

He struck a match and held it to the wick of the oil lamp standing on the table in the center of the living room. In the yellow glow he looked around, nothing had been disturbed. In fact the room seemed a little too neat. A newspaper he remembered having carelessly dropped beside the big chair was now neatly folded and lying on the table.

"Maybe my memory is getting like Pete Gribble's," Sherman said. "But I don't remember leaving the door open or picking up that paper.

SHERMAN searched the rest of the ranchhouse and found nothing that seemed wrong, and yet the uneasiness would not leave him. When he finally went to bed it was still with him and he slept restlessly.

He awoke at dawn and got up and shaved and dressed. He was cooking himself some breakfast when he heard the hoofbeats of horses and decided the two cowboys he had hired in town were arriving.

Sherman left the coffee boiling on the stove and went to the front door. It was daylight now and he saw Mike Lewis and Sheriff Ed Cooper swinging out of their saddles and ground-hitching their horses.

"Mornin', Sheriff," Sherman said. "Howdy, Mike. What brings you here so early in the mornin'?"

"Official business. Sheriff Cooper's voice was cold as he came up on the porch.

"I thought you were my friend, Sherman," Lewis said as he joined the sheriff. "When I told you I would lend you the money you needed I meant it. You didn't need to trail me when I left town last night and rob me at the point of a gun."

"Rob you!" exclaimed Sherman. "What in blazes are you talking about, Lewis. I haven't even seen you since you left the restaurant last night."

"I'd like to believe that, Earl," Lewis said, and he sounded sincere. "But didn't anybody but you and Nancy know I was carryin' a money-belt on me with a thousand dollars on it."

"I didn't know it either," said Sherman. "You offered to lend me five hundred dollars. You didn't say anything about having a thousand, Mike."

"The man who robbed me was wearin' a mask," Lewis said. "He hit me over the head with his gun and knocked me out. It was near morning when I regained my senses. Found myself lyin' at the side of the road, and my horse nearby. But the money-belt was gone."

"Can you identify that belt, Mike?" the sheriff asked.

"Shore." Lewis nodded. "I burned my initials on it, near the buckle. M. L."

"Mind if we take a look around here, Earl?" the sheriff asked.

"Go ahead."

Sherman stepped back and let Cooper and Lewis enter. He understood why the door had been left open and the paper picked up from the floor of the living room. He hadn't the faintest doubt that Lewis' money-belt would be found somewhere around. He felt sure it had been deliberately planted here in the ranchhouse.

It was the sheriff who found the money-belt stuffed back behind the kindling wood at the side of the stove in the kitchen. The money was missing. The old lawman looked at the belt and then at Sherman and frowned.

"Looks like this bears out Mike's story," Cooper said. "Where's the money, Earl?"

"I haven't got his money," Sherman said. "Never did have it. Somebody planted that belt here to cast suspicion on me."

"Shore would like to believe that, Earl," Lewis said sadly. "But I just can't do it."

"Me neither," said the sheriff. "I'm placing you under arrest, Earl. Saddle up, and we'll ride back to town."

A little over an hour later Earl Sherman

found himself in a cell in the Mesquite jail.

The barred window looked out of the rear of the adobe building, and there was no glass window pane. Sherman decided he would not like to be a prisoner in this jail in winter. In fact he wasn't at all pleased at being a prisoner at all.

He had not been there long when the sheriff escourted Pete Gribble to the door of the cell.

"Heard that you were in jail, Earl," the restaurant owner said. "I baked you a pie. Figgered you might be hungry."

"He ain't likely to starve," said the sheriff. "I feed my prisoners."

"I know," said Gribble. "But Earl's my friend. I aim to see that he is treated right even if folks do claim that he stole a thousand dollars from that doe-skin money-belt of Mike Lewis."

GRIBBLE passed the pie through the bars of the door to Sherman and then left, the sheriff going with him. The big restaurant owner had brought a knife and fork with the pie.

Sherman sat on the bunk in the cell and cut into the pie with the knife. He frowned as he felt the knife strike something hard beneath the crust. He dug out a piece of the apple pie and found that a hacksaw had been obviously placed in the pie before it had been baked.

There were light footsteps in the cell corridor.

Sherman glanced up as Nancy Buckner appeared at the door of his cell.

"I just heard about you being arrested, Earl," she said. "That Mike Lewis claims you stole his money. No wonder he was doing all that talking about lending you money. He must have planned on blaming you from the first."

"Looks that way," said Sherman. "Listen, Nancy. I want you to do something for me. Find out when Pete Gribble last baked any pies, but don't ask him directly."

"All right." Nancy drew out a gun she had hidden inside the shirt of her riding clothes. "Here, you may need this. The sheriff said he wouldn't bother to come with me while I talked to you." She turned away. "I'll find out about the pie."

For the next hour Sherman was busy with the hacksaw working on the bars at the window. He expected the sheriff to hear the noise the saw made and come to investigate, but Cooper did not approach the cell.

Finally Sherman succeeded in cutting away the bars so it was easy for him to climb out the window.

He climbed out and it was then that he noticed a bay horse that someone had left saddled and ground-hitched around the side of the building.

"Looks as if folks are mighty anxious for me to escape," Sherman muttered as he picked up the reins and swung into the saddle of the bay. "Reckon I'll oblige 'em."

NANCY came running toward him as he rode around to the back of the jail. She was carrying his cartridge-belt, and his gun in her hands.

"Somebody knocked Sheriff Cooper unconscious," Nancy said. "I just found him."

From around the corner of the building a gun roared. The bullet missed Sherman's head by inches. He fired as he caught a glimpse of a big man who had the lower part of his face masked by a bandanna handkerchief.

Nancy had flinched as the guns went off.

"Here's your own gun, Earl," she said handing it to him. "Maybe it shoots better than that one you're using.

Sherman tried out the gun in his hand. Nothing happened. Evidently there had been only one bullet in that gun. He tossed it aside and began using the Colt that Nancy had handed him. The masked man fired again, but his shot went wild. Sherman's aim was much better. The big man reeled back as a bullet caught him in the chest.

He dropped his gun.

"Got him!" exclaimed Sherman as he swung out of the saddle.

There were footsteps and voices, as the men of the town came running to see what the shooting was all about, and Mike Lewis was in the lead of the approaching citizens.

The sheriff came staggering out of his office.

"What happened?" Lewis demanded. "How did you get free, Earl?"

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FOOL'S GOLD

With a cry of triumph Dufray stepped behind the girl

Jamie Johannon's intuition comes to the fore when trouble rides!

ON THE THIRD day after they had parted from the main wagon-train on the Oregon Trail, Jamie Johannon knew that their faith in Slade Dufray had been misplaced, and that the suave, glib-talking, hard-eyed pioneer was planning to kill them.

Jamie didn't know how he knew it, nor when he first knew it, any more than he knew he had to go west, or when that decision left no other possible.

"A man does what he must, first," Jamie Johannon's horny-handed father used to say, back on the little farm in Ohio. "And after a man does what he must, a man does what he can."

Burly, rugged, plain-spoken Fergus Johannon had said it when he took his hat from its peg in the kitchen that April morning in '61. His ice-blue eyes studiously avoided those of Maria Johannon where she sat holding the red-headed chip of Johannon granite, christened Jamie, for his father's father.

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

"I must go, Maria. I'll see can I come back."

He hadn't come back. . . .

"He wasn't able to come back," Jamie's mother had told her son, through the years that followed, years that were lean and barren as only they can be when a woman and a small child are left with a man's work. "But he had to go. We have to carry on beyond him, Jamie."

And Maria Johannon, withered and bent beyond her years, had died in Jamie's twenty-third year, leaving to Jamie a heritage of lonely, hard-wrested living and the simple pronouncement:

"Do what ye must, son . . . and what ye can. . ."

Just that way. In just that order. Do what you must. Then do what you can.

To Jamie, it meant only one thing: "What a man must do is what it is right to do. What a man can do—to make himself a little more easy, a bit better off—may come; or never come. What a man must do is first!"

So as soon after the little funeral as he could, Jamie Johannon plodded westward across Indiana on his swaybacked bay, a sparse saddle-roll snugged behind him.

At the river, he traded his horse for a cow of questionable age but unquestionable condition—the owner of the cow wanted distance more than he wanted the prospective calf. Across the river, Jamie got menial work while he waited, which wasn't so very long.

Trading the calf in return for passage with a small wagon-train heading for Kansas City, the gateway to the West, he then acquired a horse, saddle and gun, in exchange for the milk-rich cow. He made his way the few miles north to St. Joe and traded his muscles and his horse-handling skill for passage and found, and some gold.

With the gold, Jamie hired a hand more skilled than he at horse-handling, and rehired out his services as a gun-guard for jittery tenderfeet. He bought some supplies, shrewdly, and a pack-horse to freight them, and where the rugged trail bent north from the settlement of the Cheyennes, he cannily sold supplies, freight-horse and all, and with the proceeds bought an interest in the wagon-train from one of the two partners. The seller had lost his fine enthusiasm for Empire with the sight of ever-recurring Indian atrocities along the trail.

"You are a shrewd man, Johannon," Xavier Ellamont, the remaining partner, told the blocky, tight-mouthed, redhead admiringly. "You'll go places."

"I do what I can," the modest Johannon said, his clear blue eyes thoughtful. "I must go west, and I do what I can as I go."

"It must be a great destiny that awaits you," Ellamont had visioned. "A great destiny!" . . .

GAZING into the shivery, yellow flames of the cold camp fire three nights out from the break with the Ellamont train, Jamie Johannon could raise his eyes and look coolly into the watchful, dark eyes of trail-wise Slade Dufray and read his destiny there:

"He has planned to kill us and take what we have! He has no intention of taking us to the gold-diggings he boasted of, much less let us buy into it."

Dufray smiled slowly at this big redhead who had taken his bait, and he didn't make any attempt to cover the wink he flicked at one of his unkempt followers, "Salty" Carmean.

"Not sorry you elected to come along, Johannon?" Dufray asked, his voice pleasant under mocking eyes. "Eh? So soon?"

Jamie shrugged. "No. I had to come. A man does what he must."

"Beans" Darrio, another of Dufray's close-mouthed, hardened crew, chuckled. "Yuh just had to come, huh, Johannon? A smart man like you knew a good thing when yuh saw it! Haw!"

"The going gets rough in two days, when we hit into the Lost River Mountains," Dufray said. "After that, it will be easier."

Some of the others—those of the Ellamont train who had elected to throw in with Jamie when Dufray's talk of a new gold strike had fired their imaginations—looked pleased, as if by the simple saying of it, Dufray and his half-dozen "other pilgrims" had somehow reached ahead and smoothed their way for them.

But, "It will be in two days," Jamie knew in his heart, then.

He stared into the flames, looking back in his mind's eye for some mistake he had made, but not finding any.

"It had to be like this," he saw it.

"Xavier Ellamont and his others are bound for farming. It is good, farming, for the man who likes it, for the man who must do it. For me, it is not good. It had to be like this."

He could be happy, without so much as a flicker of a long, steady eyelash, that he had been adamant in his refusal to take any pilgrims who had women or children in their wagons. Jethro Levant, whose wife had died by the fork of the Missouri, had wanted to throw in with his three children, but Jamie had been unyielding.

"No womenfolk, no child-folk," he had held.

Looking back now, Jamie supposed the warning knell had sounded when Dufray professed no objection to women or children. In fact, Dufray had even urged Jamie to let Theon Manton, a Pennsylvanian with a young wife and three pretty, teen-aged daughters, throw in with them.

Looking into Myra Manton's shining brown eyes Jamie had regretted, if he hadn't weakened.

"It cannot be," he had said firmly. "Else I don't go."

And Dufray had reluctantly agreed, because Jamie's followers among the split wagon-train, having less call on their resources, represented the richer part of the train. And so the sad farewells took place, the new half-train re-provisioned at a trail stockade, and they set off to cross the lower waters of the Little Lost River, and to work on to the encampment on the easterly bank of the Big Lost River.

Ahead lay the Lost River Mountains, a calculated two-days of hard work through the snow-girt passes, and then—

"Then it gets easier," Dufray had said, with that meaningful look around at his grim men.

Looking back, now, as he sat by the fire, the ring of wagons a shawl of responsibility about his husky shoulders, Jamie Johannon could see the marks of the thing, even if he couldn't admit his failure to heed the marks as mistakes.

"Dufray's willingness to take along women and children, after his warning that it was a tough trail," thought Jamie as he ticked off the "marks." "His willingness to take only me into this, when we got to talking back at the trail stockade; and then my finding out that he had similarly 'confided' in a lot of the others. His showing gold-nuggets and claiming the gold came from a mine; and his refusal to argue the matter with one of the Ellamont party who said that mine-gold was ore, and that nuggets were found only in panning of streams. And then his 'other pilgrims' who have turned out to know Dufray well, from the actions and the talk of them!"

The thought had come to him, earlier that night, that they could still change their minds; until he saw how Dufray's men were watchfully disposed about the train. They were spaced in such a way that they couldn't be herded into one group, where the now aware Jamie might work to get the drop on them. And every man of them were armed with two-gun-and-rifle power, despite their continual talking down of the hazards of the wild country.

"These Shoshones—the Indians around here—have had their taming," Dufray scoffed when some of Jamie's party had volunteered for gun-guard duty along the drive, the first day out of the train stockade. "They are friendly."

So only Dufray's men had ridden guard.

Then, Jamie had noticed that one of Dufray's men, if not Dufray himself, always managed to be present when Jamie had tried to get one or another of his party aside to voice his suspicions.

"If I so much as say the word, they'll open fire on us and massacre us here and now," Jamie was reasoning on the second day. "Dufray doesn't want it that way, though Indians, or chance pilgrims, might come on the scene and report it back. No, he plans it more shrewdly. Perhaps to 'lose' us in a snowbound pass. Kill our horses and other animals for the wolves and the mountain cats to devour the evidence! Or maybe he plans a night killing, when we are in our blankets. Then our gold, our wagons and our horses will make a neat haul, indeed! Until the next one!"

For Jamie was convinced that the glib, hearty man of two days back—the man who was coldly smiling and confident and almost bold in his display of long acquaintance with the other "pilgrims" he was taking along: Carmean, Malone, Fader, Kelley. Myers, Gansett—was working this game from long skill at it. A human

buzzard of the lonely wastes and the snowbanked passes.

"A miner of fool's gold," Jamie saw it, as he stared into the flames, pondering what he must do in order to stay alive. "Preying on the fools who trust their fellow-man when they must. I suppose that's what he considers us: pilgrim fools! And to stay alive for even our remaining two days, we must look fools, completely!"

DUFRAY spoke up suddenly, his voice trying to be casual and almost succeeding.

"Johannon? Something else—and something important. Tomorrow, all but the more experienced men in the train will have to go without arms and ammunition. We might as well get that straight right now, so there won't be any trouble."

Paddy Gilday, a truculent, balding Irishman with more of muscle and combativeness than of caution, sat up from his elbow to glare across the flames and ask:

"*What*? Th' spalpeen don't live who disarms me in this haythen country, bedad! Unless ye count me as experienced, mayhap?"

Jamie saw Fader and Gansett get up with feigned casualness and take positions where their guns would command the men about the fire. Malone, Kelley and Myers were already ringing in the wagons in their "volunteered" duty. Carmean and Dufray remained by the fire, and even Carmean hitched his weight to bring his right hand close to his gun-butt.

"Dufray means experienced men like Carmean and the other pilgrims he took on at the stockade," Jamie told the oldster. "See, they were here longer than us. They know the dangers better than we do."

"Shure an' what danger can be greater than a man unarmed, in th' West!" Paddy exploded. "That I would like to hear, begorra!"

"A man armed among curious Indians," Dufray said tightly, his eyes remaining steadily on Jamie. "Farther out here, the Indians aren't so tame. It wouldn't take but one fool shooting his gun off to start them on the warpath. We can't chance that. So—I'm taking up the guns from you tenderfeet. The others who know this country will be enough to ride the gun-guard."

Paddy bristled with truculence. But it was Jamie who held Dufray's alert attention and drew the man's snapped question. "What are you about, Johannon?"

Jamie worked the buckle of his gun-belt and slid the thing off him. "Gettin' my gun off, o' course," he said mildly. "It makes sense, what you say. 'Pears like now is the best time to do it. My Sharps rifle in th' wagon, now—why not appoint one o' your boys, like, to go collect the things?"

"One of *my* boys?" Dufray asked sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"Why, one o' them who is experienced," Jamie said, his eyes wide. "You're bossman, ain't ye?"

Dufray relaxed. "Good idea, Johannon. You're smarter than I thought. The way you get the idea so quick, I mean. I see now how it was you got to be part-owner of that Ellamont train. Now, if you'll use your influence on Paddy, here, and the others?"

Jamie looked around him, spoke the words mildly, as if the request were the most natural thing in the world. "I'd be pleased if all of you would do without question what Dufray wants," he said. "It's what must be done, friends. I wouldn't misadvise ye. It is the shrewd thing to do."

But he was thinking, "Two more days, at most. When we cross Antelope Creek they talk of, and the pass narrows in. Instead of now. . ."

There was some grumbling among the others of Jamie's fifteen wagon-crews, but such was their respect for the shrewd wisdom of this silent, blocky, determined, but amiable man who counseled them that the thing was soon accomplished.

"In any case, we are still alive," Jamie thought dourly. "And had we not complied, we would now be dead. Perhaps one or more of them; but certainly all of us! Ah, well, a man does what he must!"

Through time-forgotten craters and bordering lava-beds, the train worked its steady way, Dufray pretending surprise that no Indians appeared to engage them in powwow.

Paddy Gilday spoke it truly when he snorted, "Not even a haythen Indian would shtay around such surroundin's as these, bedad! Antelope Creek, indeed! Not

ary grass is there to feed an antelope one dacint meal!"

Nor, to Jamie's disillusioned gaze, was there. There were the badlands of Devil's Flat, a discouraging vista that served to turn back even the more hardy fortune-seekers. The train wound on, following an unseen trail familiar only to Dufray and his men.

"They go by landmarks," Jamie reasoned, marking distinctive peaks in the distance, where the land rose ever higher and then vaulted to visible spires in the misty blue. "That way, they can avoid even little-traveled routes, skirt any small settlements, keep us a secret for the snowy passes that are to come."

The land pushed up again, then, after the craters and the lava, ever upward; and then broke suddenly in a fall to an incredibly blue stream of water that flowed south from Big Lost River and the visible pass in the Lost River Mountains.

"Antelope Creek!" Dufray sang out from his seat behind the spans of the lead wagon. "Soon it will be easier, friends! We—" The man's voice ran out like gravel down a rainspout. "Turn back! Turn back a ways, and we'll hit north! We've come into it wrong! Haw, you lop-eared sons, *haw! Haw!*"

THE gun-guards looked at one another in silent understanding, spurred their horses to the task, and started to turn the wagon-train swiftly from the brink they had achieved. Jamie blinked, half-stood in his seat to look ahead, and sank back again when Carmean, his small eyes ugly, rode hard at him.

He nodded genially, even forced a grin, and called out, "Too steep to make the go-down here, huh?" He sawed at his reins, cussing the patient beasts in the traces with friendly rancor, and started his wagon about. "Haw, you smelly buzzard-bait, haw!"

Carmean, satisfied that Jamie was turning back, spurred on to hold the stragglers up and turn them, too. Then, with a smash of his whip-hand, Jamie poured the speed of pain and fear to his spans, and cried out in mock alarm when his wagon straightened on its wheels and raced ahead to the rim of the descent.

And he saw!

There, far below but on the opposite side, was an encampment of wagons, desert-ships that bravely flew the dun sails of their cover in the waning sun.

Angry shouts came from behind him as Carmean and the others roared their commands to him, commands to turn back. The shouts brought a covert grin to Jamie's thin lips and sent flame leaping in his eyes.

"Johannon! Consarn ye, Johannon—turn back!"

"Can't stop 'em!" Jamie leaned his head out to roar, as he worked the freight-animals in a gee diagonally down the slope of the down-ramp, then hawed them to the reverse angle. "They're runnin' away, by golly!"

Carmean spurred up close and swung a wicked butt of his gun to club a horse down in its traces, and Jamie sawed away with suspicious grace and dexterity for a man who had lost control.

At the same time, he shouted and roared at the top of his lungs, careful to aim his cupped hand for the nest of wagons below.

"They won't stop!" he roared. "Don't hit at 'em, Carmean—you'll only fright 'em worse than they are! Shoot, Carmean! Shoot over their heads, that'll stop 'em! *Shoot!*"

Carmean, his small eyes doubtful, but desperate to stop the wagon, raised his gun and fired three spaced shots over the heads of Jamie's spans. The wagon careened on two wheels as the now panicked horses bolted. But they bolted with obedience to Jamie's skillful handling, now right, now left; but ever down.

Jamie hauled them in close when answering shots echoed up flatly from that wagon-circle below and across the visibly shallow fording place. He leaned his head out to look up the incline to where Dufray stood, arms akimbo, rage in his stance and in his bared teeth.

"You consarned fool, Carmean!" his voice carried to Jamie.

"He said to shoot to stop th' hosses!" Carmean howled plaintively.

Jamie fought to control his face and shouted up the slope, "I calculate we can make it this way, Dufray. If you'll just follow along like my nags took me when they run away. The way I am doing it, I hold 'em in until my arms tire; an' then I whip them fast in a turn, afore they can get up real speed straight down. Watch

and I'll show ye!"

With a silent prayer that Dufray would postpone his wrath and hold his gun-hand, now that the dark, suave man knew those others below and across had seen this train, Jamie "showed" Dufray.

He didn't breathe easy, though, until he saw one, and then another, of the following wagons, crest the slope and start zigzagging down.

"Phew!" Jamie breathed then, perspiring despite the cold of the waning afternoon. "Wonder how long this helps? Well, anyway, there's another wagon-train knows we are in these parts. An' they sure help, even if they do appear to be headed *back!*"

For he knew with the experience of crossing half a continent that the wise traveler makes his wagon-park on the side of the river he is familiar with: you know what is on your side, while you don't know what is across the way. You rest on known ground only. Therefore this other train, in camp across the way, was traveling east.

"Wouldn't care if they was going straight up or down," Jamie thought with a grin as he held his impudently-grabbed lead place and bull-whipped his wagon across the ford. "Yipee, folks!" he roared ahead at the waiting knot of travelers, among whom were a number of women.

DUFRAY was all smiles and good-fellowship when he supervised the remaining wagons and bunched them in a protective circle of their own.

Jamie watched the man run his eyes critically over the group who were going the other way. "Looking for familiar faces, no doubt," Jamie reasoned it. "And happy again that he don't see none!"

The leader of the other party was a huge, bearded man named Hebron Trellway. "Nothing this way to lead a man onward," he rumbled at Jamie, when the two parties met with guarded cordiality around a giant fire made redolent with fir and balsam. "Lots o' game in the mountains. We got us enough venison and mountain-sheep and fish to last to Kingdom Come! We broke up north off the Oregon Trail, following the Snake River, and cut this way. The passes are too treacherous with the snows. Now we aim to go northeastward toward the Tetons. Past Mud Lake and on toward Teton Lake."

Jamie thumbed toward Dufray. "Yonder is the leader, not me. Name of Dufray, he is. I'm Jamie Johannon, another pilgrim."

"Dufray?" Trellway frowned and pulled at his beard. "Sara! Sara?"

A dark, slender girl came out of the group of women. "Yes, Dad?"

"The name Dufray—where do we know it?"

A stillness came over Dufray's men, and the leader himself sighed and slid a slim-fingered hand to his hip in a deceptively innocent gesture of relaxation. The girl, Sara Trellway, held her parent's gaze steadily and smilingly; but Jamie thought he saw a fluttering breath ripple her simple flowered calico dress.

"Dufray, Dad? No-o, I think not. I think the name we know is—Dafoe."

"Dafoe? No! Aye, my memory for names is bad, but—not that bad!" He blinked his brown eyes. "Not that bad."

"It must be, Dad. My memory is good, however. The name is Dafoe."

"So be it." Trellway nodded quickly, after a moment. He looked at Dufray intently. "So be it, so long as she is right. What we heard of Duf—ah, Dafoe—is not good. Where be you bound, friend?"

"West," Dufray murmured. He backed a step, bowing.

Jamie saw the end of the parley drawing near, and he saw beyond it . . . their end . . . and Dufray's crew turning back to dog the trail of the unwary pilgrims. He hadn't missed the looks that the wily Carmean and the others of Dufray's men were giving the women of the Trellway train.

"West, to the Coeur d'Alenes, and a new gold-strike," Jamie put in swiftly. "We are all in it together, all of us here. At the invitation of Mister Dafoe. I mean, Dufray." He saw Trellway's eyes widen and go still again. "Mister Dufray took pity on us an' let us in on somethin' good."

Someone in Trellway's party laughed, a stocky, blond man with a friendly grin under his amused eyes. "Fool's gold, friend. Galena. Lead. Shiny like tenderfeet imagine gold is, but lead none the less."

"Oh, no." Jamie shook his head sober-

ly. "Mister Dufray has samples o' nuggets he got from his mine to prove it."

"Ha!" the blond man roared. "Nuggets from a mine, say you? Well, it could be a stream once flowed there. But if it be that is your goal, why don't you hit through Mullan's Pass way, for you will never reach the Coeur d'Alenes this route."

"I'm sure Dufray knows," Jamie continued, despite Dufray's attempt to cut him out of the talk. "Dufray is no tenderfoot. He knows this country well. Every inch of it. He knows the Indians hereabouts."

Trellway grunted, his eyes swinging to Dufray again. "Then he should know no Indians swarm here. The buffalo is what the Indian follows, and no buffalo could graze here!"

Jamie shook his head, his eyes serene. "You must be mistaken, Mister Trellway. Dufray had us all—except his own experienced men—turn in our guns and ammunition, so we wouldn't mayhap get excited at sight of an Indian and start a war. But as he says, it will be easy going from tonight onward."

Trellway turned his head slowly to stare up at the towering, snow-capped crags behind him, and at the snow-blocked pass where Jamie and his party were headed. When he returned his gaze, it was to look at his daughter, Sara, closely, and then to lift his eyes in silent communication with the friendly young blond man in his party.

"Do you look to making our visitors at their ease," he said gently. "They must all be nervous with this talk of gold where there is but fool's gold, and of Indians where there are no Indians. Put them at their ease, Jonathan Druse, if you will?"

The man Druse looked startled, then moved his right elbow slightly, and a long-barreled six-gun was blossomed in his hand and his voice was softly icy.

"JUST so as everybody will feel cozy," he said, his eyes lazily alert and looking over the group of them impartially, "we will disarm all of you. Steady, all! Nobody moves, or— Halt, *you!*"

His bark and his gun were directed at Jamie, who was moving slowly, hands at ready, eyes intent. Jamie shook his head.

"No," he said, and kept moving. "No!"

But he wasn't saying it to Druse. He was saying it to Dufray, who had been standing near Sara Trellway, and was leaning toward her though his feet were rooted in place.

Sweat was breaking out on Jamie's forehead again. Dufray was smart. Dufray was desperate. Dufray had correctly gauged the status of the leader, Trellway, and more. He had gauged the man's deep-abiding affection for his daughter, and though rage was in his heart at realization of Jamie's smooth giveaway of his dark game, he had one more bold gamble to break this trap the blue-eyed giant of a pilgrim had cunningly woven about him.

"No! Let the girl alone," Jamie said, his voice harsh in the stillness. "We're pushing on with you, Dufray! Stand clear, I tell you!"

But it was the girl herself who moved, after a long, searching look into Jamie's grim face. Moved—but not away from Dufray; *to* him! She seemed to fall into his play thoughtlessly, frightened or impelled by Druse's words and by Jamie's purpose.

With a sharp cry of triumph, Dufray stepped behind the girl, a long arm circling her waist and jerking her hard against him as a shield while his own gun stabbed under her right arm to snout menacingly at Jamie.

"I'll take over now," Dufray snarled, his eyes ugly. "Stop right there, Johannon! You, Trellway—call off your watchdog, or you'll go on from here without a daughter! If you don't think I mean it, just come ahead!"

Jonathan Druse wavered a moment, then at an order from Hebron Trellway, his gun hand came down slowly.

"That's nice and sensible," said Dufray, his eyes mirroring his satisfaction. "All right, Johannon—start away! Carefully. Carmean! When our pilgrims get away across the creek again, you and your best three men come back here. We'll—"

Jamie, who had come to a stop with the girl's puzzling wrong move, keened his gaze on her now, reading something in her face. Her right eye winked once, slowly. Then again. . . He saw the play!

At the third flick of the girl's lashes, things happened. Her right arm tautened suddenly, momentarily throwing Dufray's

aim awry; at the same instant, Jamie roared his challenge and hurled himself forward in a berserk and desperate dive.

Dufray cursed wildly, fought his gun level and fired, the sting of the bullet creasing powder along Jamie's cheek. Then Jamie was clawing Dufray's gun with one hand and swinging a hard blow to the man's face with the other.

Two more shots rang out, and then a third; but Jamie paid no heed as he rolled with the man, shaking him like a terrier shakes a rat, each time he came atop. The shots, Jamie realized, came from behind him, not from Dufray's gun, and he knew Druse and his men must be at desperate grips with Dufray's gunmen. But he couldn't pause to look, to question, to even hope.

Dufray grunted with a lethal left planted to his stomach. Then Jamie was up and dragging Dufray with him. He kicked the gun away, and smashed, smashed, smashed, at those dark features that were turning red under his fists.

He fought the new hold that was on him until he realized the hands were friendly, and were many. They were the hands of Druse and Trellway. And of Sara Trellway.

"Hold!" Hebron Trellway roared. "Hold, man! He is all but dead now. As are three of his followers. And you, Sara—you must be fair daft to do such a terrible thing! You—you might have been killed!"

"A girl does what she can," Sara Trellway said, her eyes happy through her disheveled coiffure. "And Dad—you were right, that name was Dufray!"

Jamie Johannon was cool again, cool with a certain knowledge. He didn't know how long he knew it, nor just when. But he knew it. A man did what he must, and Jamie said it.

"I'm joining your party, Mister Trellway," he said. "I must." Then he smiled at Sara. "A man does what he must. . . ."

THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from Page 7)

robes, Foreign Legionnaires on the march and bright-walled tents of some nomad shiek.

The Imperial Valley

The twin cities of Calexico and Mexicali straddle the U.S.-Mexico border a little ways below the main town of El Centro.

Known history of the below-sea-level bowl dates back to 1775, when the Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza roamed there, up from Mexico, with 20 soldiers. They nearly died of thirst before they found a spring in the foothills to the west. Captain de Anza left a mighty discouraging account of the place in a diary, calling it the devil's inferno. The fancy name, Imperial Valley, was wished onto it less than 50 years ago, by land agents who had a hard time luring settlers.

At one time, the desert sink was an arm of the sea, extending up from Gulf of Lower California. You can still see the ancient shoreline on the sides of surrounding mountains.

In 1906-07, the Colorado River silted in and overflowed, nearly making the valley a part of the ocean again. The flood formed Salton Sea, about 30 miles long, which still remains as a basin that catches irrigation drainage. Through the long process of evaporation, the water has become almost as salty as Utah's Great Salt Lake. Salton Sea is a haven for millions of waterfowl. Ducks and geese are pests that cause big losses to grain growers every year. The birds rest on the open waters of Salton Sea in daytime, then swoop onto the fields at night, to feed.

A Strange Duck Hunt

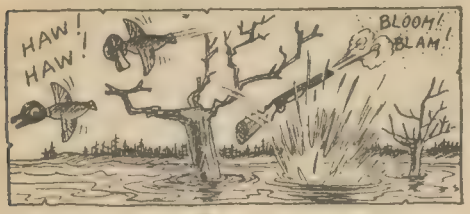
About the strangest duck hunt I ever made was in Salton Sea, a good many years ago, before most of it was turned into a national game refuge.

Out from the shoreline, near a place called Fig Tree John's, there had been a grove of cottonwoods before Salton Sea was formed. At this time, the trees still stood there, in three-four feet of water, but dead of course, the bark peeled off and the trunks and branches alkali white.

A party of us conceived the bright idea of stripping and wading out to those trees, clothes bundled on top of our heads, then climbing up into the snags and branches, dressing, and going to work on a passing flight of birds.

The old, dead branches were sort of slip-

pery. One of the crowd, letting go with both barrels at a fine band of mallards, toppled from his perch and hit the water with the



ducks he dropped. It was midwinter, just enough above the freezing point to feel like zero weather.

All together, we got a fine bag of ducks. But we did that tree act only that one time. The rugged part was peeling off again, at the end of the day, to wade back ashore.

Fig Tree John

Old Fig Tree John was a mysterious character, an Injun. He didn't really belong thereabouts, and had no truck with the Cahuilla tribe, that did. He was a renegade Apache, who had roamed from the San Carlos Reservation in Arizona. A book of that name was written about him, years later. His hogan ranchita was a landmark, but Fig Tree John is long dead now, and I can't find even a trace of the old place.

Here's something I didn't know until right recent. It isn't likely that many of you hombres and hombresses remember, 'way back when this Home Corral was started, that I told about an out-of-the-way region where "wood sinks and rock floats." I called the place Lost Valley, and sort of figured that I'd discovered it.

The truth is, I was only about 160 years behind the original explorer. That "Lost Valley" was the place where de Anza and his party found water! Yuha Desert, the map calls it.

About the sinking wood and floating rock? Well, the rock hereabouts is mostly light, volcanic pumice, nearly as buoyant as cork. The wood—centuries-old desert ironwood—has the heft and feel of metal, and goes to the bottom in a bucket of water.

The Unchanging Desert

So I've done some back-trailing, you see. On the desert, more than anywhere else I know, you can do that and get a new thrill with each return.

The desert doesn't change, not much, but a traveler does. The more he travels, the more he learns. And the more he knows, the more he sees. So you can always go back to a place and notice interesting things that you missed previously.

A genuine desert rat is one that stays on, through the terrific heat of the summer. But along come April—or May at the latest, with occasional days up to 115 in the shade—a footloose pilgrim starts to think of the cool, green northland. There comes a sunny morning when his campspot is bare, and he's migrated for far parts.

He takes the buzzard route, usually up through Nevada or maybe Utah, or California if he's bound for the timbered Northwest. Buzzards fly south in winter, north

in summer, which is a fact not widely known. If you're after agreeable weather, watch the buzzards. They can tell you more than the weatherman or any tall-talking tourist literature.

Some folks are not lucky enough to be tourists. Among the part time desert rats you find working folks of various gypsy callings. They work north in summer, south in winter—like the buzzards. Sometimes, in the desert country, these winter visitors are called "snowbirds."

I'm another snowbird. Sounds nicer than to be called a buzzard, anyhow. I roam up and down the inter-mountain country, taking my time to it, usually. That's the way to travel. Travel isn't measured proper in miles, anymore than a life can be reckoned in years.

It's what you see and do along the way that's important.

Short and Long Miles

In the experience of almost everybody, there are short miles, and miles that seem endless. There are minutes that are about as long as years, and happy, carefree years

that whisk past in almost no time at all. Hasn't it been that way with you?

There lived a man named Emerson, who had a knack for putting such thoughts to words. He said:

"To finish the moment, to find the journey's in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom. . . Five minutes of today are worth as much as five minutes in the next millenium."

Well, hombres and hombresses, here's journey's end so far as this one get-to-gether is concerned. So *Adios* till we meet up again, in the Home Corral in next issue of POPULAR WESTERN Magazine. In the meantime, I'll be digging up something you'll want to hear about, here Out West.

—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THERE'S a special treat in store for readers of Western fiction in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN! It's THE BRAND ARTIST, a splendid novelet of the New Mexico rangeland by that great writer of cowboy stories, Walt Coburn.

The hero of this yarn was a rank stranger in the little cowtown of Pinon, New Mexico, where the natives were wary of strangers. This cowpuncher came from somewhere up north, you could tell by his clothes.

There was a big dance going on in the schoolhouse and the stranger stood in the coat room where the stags gathered, but he stood apart from the other men. His gray eyes watched the dancing couples with an almost wistful look. Like he wanted to ask some girl for a dance, but didn't dare horn in where strangers were not welcome.

There was a Mexican stringed orchestra that sang the words to the Mexican songs they played. And when the song was a popular one, some of the girls sang as they danced.

But mostly the eyes of the stranger watched one couple that were outstanding on the crowded dance floor. The man was tall and slim with sorrel colored hair and a handsome hawk-beaked lean-jawed face, and from under sun bleeched brows his eyes were green and cold and he danced with a swaggering arrogance.

He was the best dancer on the floor, but as he danced he had a habit of shouldering the other men and once or twice he did it deliberately and with a boldness that was a challenge to the man, and in that instant his eyes turned cold as splintered green bottle glass. His presence on the floor caused a hubbub of conversation like the following:

"That Jay Burlingame—He'll bump the wrong gent one of these times, and have a fight on his hands—I'd give a purty to watch some feller clean his prow."

"Can't be done unless the feller's tough enough to whup them Round Hat hard cowhands of his he fetches to town to side him in a ruckus."

"If Jay Burlingame makes the bad mistake of botherin' the sweetheart of one of them Mexican vaqueros, he might git a knife shoved deep into his gizzard when he steps out into the dark."

"Jay might give them senoritas the eye, but that's as far as it goes with that long geared spur jingler. Jay Burlingame's too busy ridin' close herd on Matt Weaver's only daughter Sally to pay any attention to them other gals. He aims to marry Sally Weaver, *and* the Poled Punkin cow outfit, regardless."

"Not while Matt Weaver is able to handle a six-shooter, that Jay Burlingame won't marry his daughter. The cow country's makin' book on it. And you kin git odds. . . ."

The stranger watched Sally Weaver dancing with Burlingame and the owner of the Round Hat outfit resented it. He was looking for trouble, and the stranger was ready for it. But a cowboy from the Poled Pumpkin gave the stranger a friendly warning.

"Take 'er easy, stranger," he said. "Jay Burlingame don't like you. He's plumb ugly, and if there's a ruckus he's got the backin' of his tough Round Hat cowhands. You better ease outa here."

"I'm obliged." The stranger grinned. "I'm takin' yore tip."

He left the dance and went to a saloon along the street. He hadn't been there long when Burlingame and a half a dozen of his tough looking cowboys came into the saloon. Burlingame deliberately spat on the stranger's boot. Then he tossed a silver Mexican peso on the bar in front of the stranger.

"Dick Smith." Jay Burlingame gave him the contemptuous nickname for a man who drinks alone and pays for his lone drink, "buy yourself another Dick Smith."

The stranger held his filled shot glass. His wrist flipped and he threw the raw whiskey square into the bloodshot green eyes. He picked up the Mexican money with his free

hand and his first closed over the big silver peso, so that the knuckles showed white. The large silver coin would give the fist more punishing power.

Jay Burlingame recoiled, snarling, blinded by the raw whiskey in his eyes. He was knuckling the whiskey from his eyes when the stranger moved in.

He dropped into the stance of a professional fighter and stepped forward. His lips spread in a flat grin. His eyes measured the big man and found the right spot for a solar plexus punch. All his weight, all the drive of his powerful shoulders went into that punch below the briskit. Jay Burlingame's jaws slacked. His knees hinged and he started going down.

The stranger shifted. He brought one up from the floor, an uppercut that caught the lobbing head under the point of the jaw. The red head snapped back as the big six-shooter went down, knocked out cold.

Then there was a six-shooter in the stranger's hand. His eyes were hard and bitter cold. He grinned flatly at the Round Hat cowhands.

[*Turn page*]

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"Anybody want to pick up where he dropped it?" The stranger's voice cut like a whiplash.

They backed away, lifting their hands a little to show they held no guns.

The stranger tossed the silver peso on the floor alongside the red head. Then he backed out through the rear door and slammed it shut. He walked swiftly down the street to the feed barn where he had left his horse, and saddled fast.

"Which trail," the stranger asked the barn man, "does a man take to reach the Poled Pumpkin home ranch?"

And that's just the start of THE BRAND ARTIST. Soon "Dick Smith" discovers how a Poled Pumpkin brand can be changed into a Round Hat brand and not be detected—for the stranger is from the Cattlemen's Association, and knows his job! THE BRAND ARTIST is a punch-packed yarn from start to finish—Walt Coburn at his best!

But that's only the first of the three splendid novelets to be featured in the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

In second place comes ARMY BLUE IN THEIR BLOOD, a smashing novelet by Steuart Emery. Cleve Drury had grown up in the garrisons of the Western Frontier, for his father had been an Army officer. It had been Drury's dream to go to West Point—and then a rifle bullet had cut his father down in an Indian campaign. Cleve Drury and his widowed mother had moved to a little Pennsylvania town. and the boy had learned to be a telegraph operator.

His mother died and Cleve returned to take up new duties to the West. No sooner there, but he was captured by Captain Starker, the leader of a renegade band of killers who planned to take over Fort Bodie.

The daughter of the commandnig officer at the fort was also captured by the renegades. It was up to Drury and the girl to find a way to send a message to save the fort. How they do it makes ARMY BLUE IN THEIR BLOOD a novelet that's packed

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Once again Chick Bowdrie, Texas Ranger, goes into action in CASE CLOSED—NO PRISONERS, the exciting novelet by Louis L'Amour which also appears in the next issue.

The men who robbed the bank in Kimble of forty-thousand dollars had used ruthless methods to do the job. They had gone to the home of Josh Phillips, the town banker, tortured him and made him open the bank and then left him dying as they got away with the money.

On the third day after the robbery, Sheriff Walt Borrow was forced to give up trying to find the bandits himself, so he wired the Texas Ranger headquarters at Austin, and two days later Chick Bowdrie arrived in Kimble.

The Ranger found that by pretending he knew a lot more about the bank robbers than he actually did, he would bring his foes out into the open. Bowdrie proved too tough and too smart for them—as you'll find out in NO PRISONERS, a novelet you will enjoy and remember!

Of course there will also be a number of

[*Turn page*]

BUFFALO BILLY BATES TAKES THE TRAIL OF AN INDIAN CHIEF

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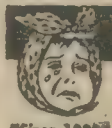

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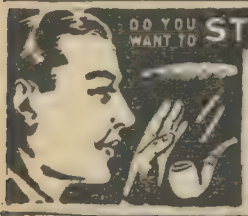

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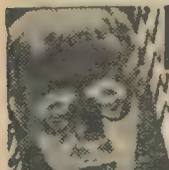

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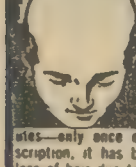

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SEND NO MONEY

carefully selected shorter Western yarns and interesting features to round out the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN. Plenty of good reading for everyone!

OUR LETTER BOX

WE are always delighted to hear from our readers, so why don't you write us and tell us which stories you enjoyed the most in this and other issues of POPULAR WESTERN? Also tell us about the yarns that didn't appeal to you, for we can take a knock as well as a boost, and knowing the likes and dislikes of our readers helps us prepare future issues to your taste!

And now let's take a look at just a few of the many letters and postcards we have been receiving:

I have been reading POPULAR WESTERN for six years now, and think it is great. I particularly like the Painted Post stories about Sheriff Blue Steele and Shorty Watts, but there is one thing that worries me about those two fighting lawmen. They never have any romance in their lives. I'd like to see them fall in love with a couple of nice girls. How about it, huh?—*Betty Marshall, Chicago, Ill.*

Sort of suspect that you have started something with that suggestion, Betty. Wouldn't be at all surprised if a lot of our other readers have something to say about it one way or the other, and we'll see what Tom Gunn, who writes the Painted Post stories, thinks of the idea.

POPULAR WESTERN is swell! I have read the magazine for a long time. But I will tell you my favorite stories in the 1948 copies. Here they are: OWLHOOT GLEAM FOR A RUSTED STAR by Nels Leroy Jorgenson, A TEXAS GRAVE TO FILL by Walker A. Tompkins, GREEN RAWHIDE by Malcom Wheeler-Nicholson, THE BORDER PATROL by William Hopson, GLORY FOR A DESERT FIGHTER by Larry Harris, THE JUDGE WAS HONEST by Bruce Douglas, and BUFFALO SOLDIERS by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. I sure go for those Frontier Army-life stories. Of course there were a lot of other stories I liked—but these are my favorites. —*John Barton, Philadelphia, Pa.*

Thanks for your nice letter, John and the list of your favorite stories. You certainly picked some good ones—we'll agree with you on that!

Have been a steady reader of POPULAR WESTERN for three years and I think it is the

best Western magazine on the market. I have been trying to remember one story I read in the magazine that I didn't like and I can't think of any, so if I told you the stories I did like what would happen? I would have to list every one for the past three years, and I'm not going to do that. So I'll just say all the stories are good. —*Fred Moore, Denver, Col.*

That would make quite a list, Fred, and thanks for your letter. Nice to know you enjoy the magazine so much.

Was rummaging in a box of books I have for something to read and ran across one of your POPULAR WESTERN magazines printed for March 1937, and just wondered if there was any magazine that old and in perfect condition, and thought it would be fun to let you know about it. —*Mrs. E. A. Gibbs, Milano, Texas.*

That is fairly old, Mrs. Gibbs, but we have bound volumes of POPULAR WESTERN for office use here, that go back further than that. The first issue of the magazine was November, 1934. Thanks for writing!

Looks like that's all the letters we'll quote from this time—but there'll be others in coming issues and let's hear from more of our readers! Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody—see you all next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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PIE FOR THE PRISONER

(Concluded from Page 82)

"Pete Gribble baked me a pie with a hacksaw inside it," said Sherman as he reached down and removed the mask from the face of the wounded man, revealing the countenance of the restaurant owner. "He was plumb anxious for me to get away."

"I found out he baked that pie last night," Nancy said.

"Shore," said Sherman. "After he robbed Mike and framed me by leaving the money-belt at my ranch. He was so sure that I would be arrested and put in jail, that he had the pie all baked and ready before the sheriff even brought me into town."

"And he knew that Mike had a thousand dollars in the money-belt and the money-belt was made of doeskin," said the sheriff. "I started to ask him how be knew that and he knocked me out."

"It was supposed to look like I did it trying to escape," said Sherman. "Where did you get that gun you gave me with only one bullet in it, Nancy?"

"Why, Gribble gave it to me," said Nancy. "Told me that you might need it."

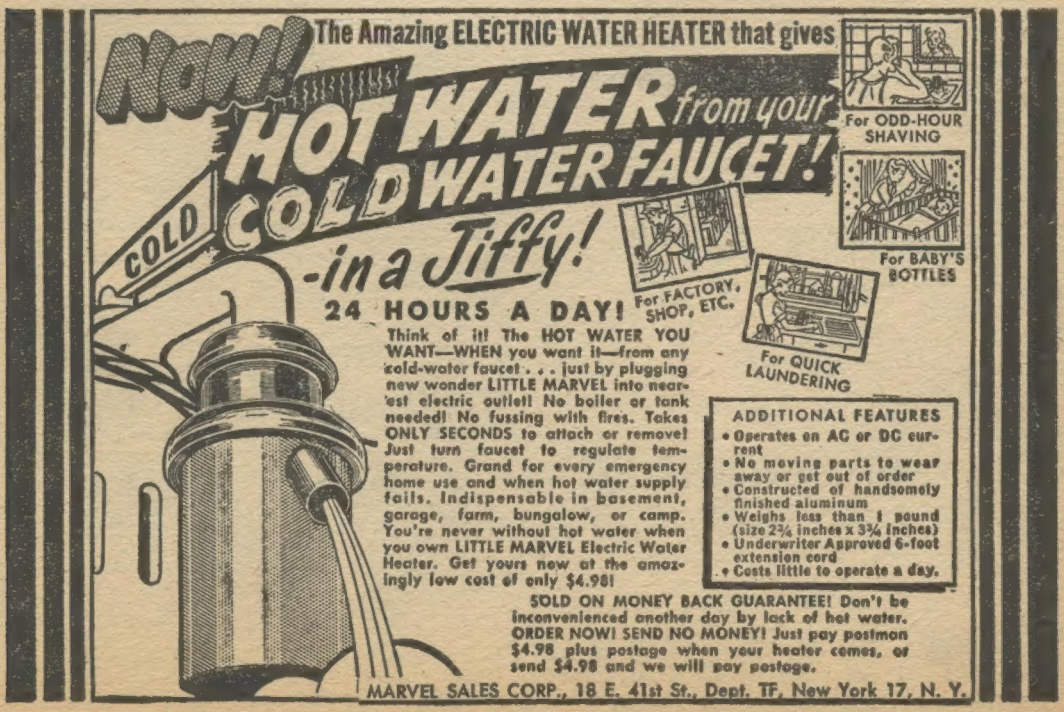
"He evidently expected to kill me and then claim he did it as I shot at him trying to escape," said Sherman. "But what I don't see is why he wanted to rob Mike Lewis."

"Reckon I can explain that," said Lewis. "When I heard about your last payment on your ranch being due from a feller in the bank, I also heard that Gribble owed a mortgage payment of his restaurant that had to be paid right away."

"Then you really meant yore offer to lend me that money, Mike," said Sherman in surprise. "You didn't try to frame me at all."

"Shore I meant it." The foreman smiled at Sherman and Nancy. "I was kind of hopin' that if we were all friends you might let me be best man at the wedding."

"Really, Mike," said Nancy. "You might wait until Earl proposes before suggesting that." She smiled. "But I suspect you might be best man."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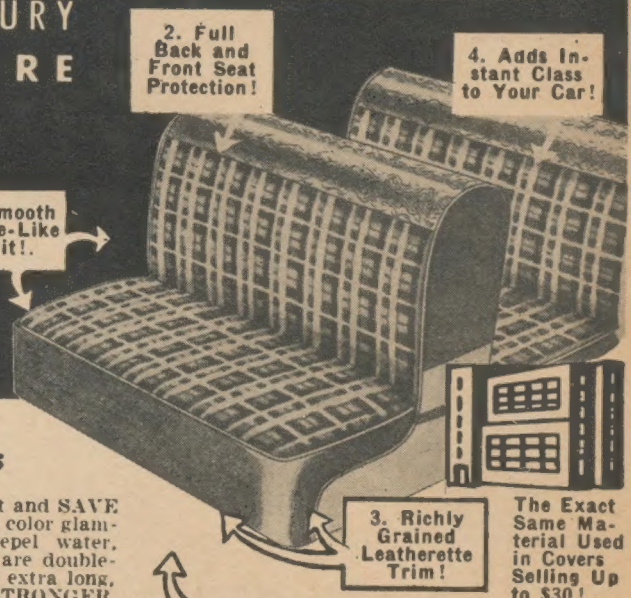
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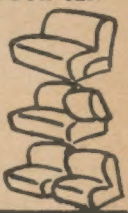

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